

“If You Should Suffer for Righteousness’ Sake”

The Seventh in a Series of Sermons on 1 Peter

Texts: 1 Peter 3:8-17; Psalm 34:1-22

It is foolish to attempt to deny reality. Christians are going to be misunderstood, mistrusted, and persecuted because we are believers in Jesus Christ. Those unbelievers and secularists we encounter do not understand our faith in Christ, they see no need whatsoever to believe in Jesus, and when they do understand what we believe, they openly reject it—especially Christian teaching about salvation being found only in Jesus, as well as Christian teaching about sexual ethics. Whenever this conflict between Christians and unbelievers occurs—and it will—how are we to respond? In chapter 3 of his first epistle, Peter instructs us to seek to bring glory and honor to Jesus Christ in such situations, rather than focusing on personal insults directed our way. Christians must learn how to deal with those who have power over us, without being afraid of our oppressors, and to do so in such a way that we continually point those who are contentious back to the suffering servant, Jesus. Christians must be prepared for these encounters with both the right answers and the right attitude.

We are continuing our series on 1 Peter, and we have made our way into chapter three, where we are considering Peter’s instructions to Christians of the Diaspora. As we mentioned throughout our series, Peter’s audience is a group of Christian exiles in Asia Minor, who have been displaced from their homes by a decree from Claudius, the previous Roman emperor. Peter begins his letter of encouragement to these struggling sojourners by reminding them that God has caused them to be born again, they have been set apart (sanctified) by God and therefore sprinkled by the blood of Jesus—ensuring their sins are forgiven. Also, Christians are to live holy lives before the Lord so as to silence those critical of our faith.

Peter reminds his hearers that although they are facing difficult times from their pagan neighbors, in God’s sight, these people are elect exiles, a chosen race, and spiritual house, indwelt by the Spirit of the living God. Although they are citizens of Rome, they simultaneously possess a heavenly citizenship and are heirs to all the things promised them by God. But their heavenly citizenship will bring them into conflict with the unbelievers around them, and so the Apostle seeks to prepare his readers to deal with those reject Jesus, and who do not understand why Christians believe and do they things they do.

In 1 Peter 2:11-3:7, Peter addresses three of the main elements of the Greco-Roman household code—an unwritten code dating back perhaps to Aristotle, and which defines a number of the social relationships upon which Greco-Roman society was built. These relationships include the authority of civil government, the relationship between slaves and masters, as well as the relationship between husbands and wives. Christians too believe that these matters are important and God has addressed a number of them in his word. Yet, in each one of these societal relationships, and under current circumstances, Christians have little power or control and were facing tremendous persecution from their pagan neighbors as the elect exiles of the Diaspora of Asia Minor.

Throughout section of his epistle, Peter exhorts Christians to submit to the Roman civil authorities, even those governors then persecuting Peter’s readers—except in those cases where civil authorities demand that Christians violate the will of God. When this happens, Christians are to obey God rather than men. Peter instructs Christian slaves and servants to submit to their masters, even if their masters are cruel. Finally Peter exhorts Christian wives to submit to their husbands, even if their husbands are not Christians. At the same time, Peter insists that Christian husbands not view their greater physical

strength as a reason for believing their wives to be inferior—as the Greco-Roman household code held. Rather, Christian husbands are to see their wives as weaker vessels who require “understanding” (the knowledge that wives are to be treated as taught in Scripture), and to treat them with honor—which means to be treated with the same respect to which all divine image bearers and co-heirs with Christ are entitled.

In the light of Christianity’s conflict with various aspects of the Greco-Roman household codes, we forget just how revolutionary Christianity was in the first century—especially in regard to sexual ethics and to societal relationships. In all three of these cases he mentions, Peter urges Christians to respect lawful authority and submit to it upon two grounds; 1). We submit to those in authority over us in order to be a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, who demonstrated great humility in those times he suffered and was persecuted, and 2). We submit to those over us to deflate or remove any objections those in authority over us might have, so that Christians receive better treatment from the hands of those who oppress them.

In verses 21–25 of chapter 2, Peter paraphrases the prophecy of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, which speaks Jesus as the “suffering servant” of the Lord, whose example we are to follow. Peter writes, “*for to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*” Since vengeance belongs to the Lord, Christians are not to retaliate in anger against those who persecute them. Instead, Christians are to follow the example of Jesus, and endure our suffering patiently, knowing that Jesus’ suffering preceded his resurrection and ascension.

Beginning in verse 8 of chapter 3, Peter concludes his discussion of the Christian’s relationship to the Greco-Roman household code (going back to chapter 2:11) by summing up what a Christian’s attitude should be toward those who persecute them during difficult times. Peter then lists those things Christians ought to do so as to encourage and strengthen one another during the difficult times such as those Peter has been describing. The Apostle confirms and illustrates these points by appealing to the words of Psalm 34—a Psalm to which Peter alludes throughout and quotes in this section of his letter.

In verses 8-9, Peter writes, “*finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.*” When Christians manifest these qualities among themselves (i.e., within the church), as well as in their dealings with those outside the church (those persecuting them) Christians are not as prone to division, and will mutually encourage one another—something very important during times and trial and persecution.

The first matter on Peter’s list is “unity of mind.” Christians exhorted are to be like-minded, which means they should believe the same things,¹ and work hard to avoid division within their own ranks. Sadly, struggling and persecuted Christians are prone to division, because during trying times, people’s

¹ Contra Davids’ assertion that Peter’s words do not refer to things like a doctrinal statement. See: Peter H. Davids, The First Epistle of Peter, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 124.

sinful behavior shows itself in seeking to do things their way, while ignoring the circumstances of others. This is one of the reasons why historic Protestant churches have extensive doctrinal standards as a means of being “like-minded.” Our own doctrinal standards are known as the “Three Forms of Unity,” because Reformed churches unite around these particular doctrines.

Next, Peter instructs Christians to be sympathetic to one another. Paul expands the meaning of this a bit in Romans 12:15, where he writes, “*rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.*” Christians should strive to put themselves in the shoes of their brothers and sisters, and genuinely care about the needs of others. Even in a medium sized church such as ours, we have people at any given time experiencing the great joys of life (marriages, births, anniversaries) while others endure the dreaded events of life (job loss, sickness, and death). These are things of which we are to be aware, and we are to respond accordingly. We “*rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.*”

Peter also exhorts Christians to demonstrate “brotherly love” (*philadelphoi*). Peter’s main point here is that the church is the New Israel, and its members share a common brotherhood which unites us in deep and powerful ways—for many of us, our bond to our brothers and sisters in Christ can be deeper than our ties to family members. A church family is a wonderful thing. As God loves us in Jesus Christ (vertical), so too we are to love all those who are likewise the objects of God’s love (horizontal). This kind of brotherly love is not a shallow demonstration of love typical of much of American Christianity—those kumbaya moments when we just wanna hug everybody—but is manifest in concrete acts on behalf of others. We love our brothers and sisters when we watch their kids when there is a need, when we send meals or words of encouragement when someone is ill, or when we help those who need help (which is why we have deacons). This is not only a blessing to God’s people, it is a powerful witness to those outside the church who are watching our every move.

Christians are to have a tender heart—closely related to sympathy. A tender heart alerts us to the needs of others. In Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul ties this kind of tender-heartedness to forgiveness, which we are to extend to others who have wronged us, and which we receive back in return from those whom we have wronged. In Ephesians 4:32, Paul writes, “*be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*” When Peter speaks of a humble mind, he simply means that we should put meeting the needs of others ahead of our own agendas.

It is ironic that several of the Greek words used by Peter (or better, his secretary) are unique to the New Testament (and only found here), but which are used widely in classical Greek writings on virtue. Furthermore, the last of these terms (*tapinos*—humility) was an attitude scorned by the Greeks and Romans who saw humility as a sign of weakness, like that of a submissive slave.² In a society where social standing really matters, why would anyone want to act like a slave? Here, again we see how revolutionary Christianity was in the ancient world—seeing humility as a virtue (and seeing Jesus as the supreme example of this), while the Greco-Roman pagans saw humility as a character flaw because it was the mark of someone of lower social standing.

When, in verse 9, Peter tells us not to repay evil for evil, and not revile those who revile us (i.e., speak abusively) he is alluding to a saying of Jesus found in Luke 6:27-28. “*But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*”

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), Logos, 3:8.

Our natural instinct (actually the instinct of our fallen and sinful nature) is to respond to such personal offences in kind. In this we are just like Lamech, whose boast is recounted in Genesis 4:23-24, shortly after the fall of our race into sin. “*Lamech said to his wives: `Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold.*” There is a fair bit of Lamech’s boast within each of us. If someone reviles us, we return in kind. We de-friend them on Facebook

Rather, Peter reminds us, “*on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.*” Some background here is important because to curse someone in the world of the superstitious Greeks and Romans was literally to place an actual curse upon them—the one whom we cursed would suffer illness, crop failure, infertility, calamity, and so on (think of sticking a pin in a voodoo doll). In the modern world we take “cursing someone” to be insulting them, as to their person, parentage, or appearance. Not so in the world of Peter’s day. To curse someone was to place a curse upon them. This is why Peter instructs Christians not to return a cruel word or a curse with another cruel word or curse, but to bless them (i.e., speak a good word, or a peaceful word to them). Christians, after all, know that there are no such things as “curses” which bring illness or disaster. This is but one place, where our embrace of God’s sovereignty brings great comfort.

Peter says that Christians are to bless others because we have been promised a heavenly blessing, which one day we will obtain, and therefore, should be reflected in our conduct toward others. In this case, Peter says we bless others in order to obtain that inheritance which is already ours—as Peter has said previously in verses 3, 5, and 23 of chapter 1. Peter is not saying that unless we bless others we will miss out on the promised inheritance. Rather, good works—like extending blessings to others when they curse us—are the fruit of a living hope and a justifying faith, but not the ground of our salvation.³ These are things which those already born again and sprinkled with the blood of Jesus do from a grateful heart.

In verses 10-12, Peter cites verses 12-16 of the 34th Psalm (which we read as our Old Testament lesson). “*For `Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.*” Psalm 34 deals with suffering and the way in which the Lord delivers his people in the midst of it. Peter has already alluded to the 34th Psalm in chapter 2:3, and now quotes it here (with several alterations), because it applies so well to the situation of many in Peter’s audience.⁴

Peter’s struggling readers in Asia Minor need to hear what YHWH told the people of Israel. When God’s people suffer at the hands of others, YHWH knows about it. He hears the pleas of deliverance from his people. In quoting this Psalm, Peter is reminding Christians that YHWH will punish the wicked, which is why Christians are not to lash out at those who persecute them. The knowledge that God will deal with those who persecute his people on the day of judgment, enables God’s people not to respond in kind. God will deal with them far better than we can. In the Psalm itself, the Psalmist speaks

³ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos 3:9.

⁴ See the discussions in: Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos 3:10; C. E. B. Cranfield, I & II Peter and Jude, The Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press 1960), 96-97; and G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic; 2007), 1018.

of life and blessings—things in this world, while in his interpretation of the Psalm, Peter focuses upon the blessings his readers/hearers will receive in the age to come.

This is why Christians are to bless those who persecute them. Believers know that YHWH's face is against those who do harm his people. As one writer puts it, "whether under the terms of the old covenant or the new, the privilege of belonging to God's redeemed people brings with it the grateful, grace-driven responsibility to pursue righteousness and holiness, not to presume on God's grace while trying to live no differently from the world."⁵ The point bears repeating that this is surely a test of faith for Christians—that we let God deal with those who persecute us, just as we believe that the heavenly inheritance promised us exceeds anything we can imagine. We must believe this in order to live our lives in light of God's promise to remedy all wrongs in the age to come.

In verse 13, Peter changes subjects a bit, as he now addresses the theme of suffering and persecution in broader terms than in the previous section. Peter reminds his readers of the reality that a Christian may be called to suffer at the hands of those who have more power and who hate the gospel. Yet, Christians need not fear suffering (as we are so apt to do) because suffering is often God's chosen way to blessings greater than can be imagined. After all, this is apparent in the life of Jesus, who suffered unspeakable abuse and scorn and yet through it all, redeemed his people, fulfilling God's greater purposes. It is a fact of the Christian life that when suffering comes, we seek God more fervently than at other times. In the midst of it all, Peter reminds us, we must learn to look to the example set before us by our Lord Jesus.

In verse 13, Peter now speaks in more concrete terms, alluding to Psalm 34 cited earlier, but obviously making application to the situation his readers were then facing. "*Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?*" Peter's point throughout this section is quite simple. It is hard to curse, revile, or persecute people who do good. Citizens of heaven—who identify themselves to unbelievers through their profession of faith in the Triune God who sent his son to save us from our sins, and who are devoted to living holy lives in the fear of the Lord—know that whatever ills they experience in this life will be made right on the last day, when believers receive their heavenly inheritance and when unbelievers face God on the day of judgment. It is far better to suffer now for doing good, than it is to escape the stigma of being a Christian in a pagan world (or, as in our case, a secularized world), but then face the holy God on the day of judgment.

The reality is that Christians will suffer in this present evil age. This is why knowing how the final chapter of human history turns out, gives us much needed perspective on our present struggles. In verse 14, Peter explains this perspective when he writes, "*but even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.*" The grammar makes the verse a bit difficult to translate, but the sense is that *if* (i.e., when) a Christian suffers for righteousness' sake (and in all likelihood we will), then we can count on the promise of God to make things right in the end (blessing). Suffering for righteousness' sake does not refer to the kind of suffering all of Adam's fallen race must endure—sickness, depravation, disaster, and death. Peter is specifically referring to the suffering Christians endure from unbelievers inflicted upon God's people *because* they are Christians. Peter's word of encouragement echoes a saying of Jesus found in Matthew 10:28, "*do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.*" It was once said of the Calvinist martyrs in the low countries in the 1550's, that they "feared no man because they feared God."

⁵ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 1037.

Despite their difficult circumstances, the Christians of the Diaspora are not to fear those who have earthly power over them, and who seek to do them wrong. Of course, fear is the natural reaction in such situations. Peter describes one way his readers/hearers in verse 15 can deal with such fear. *“In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”* This verse is often cited (with some justification) as marching orders for Christians to be able to engage in basic apologetics (intellectual defenses of the Christian faith), so as to answer charges brought against the Christian faith by unbelievers. In our particular circumstances—secularized America—these challenges are often intellectual arguments raised about the existence of God, the reliability of the Bible, the facts surrounding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as the problem of evil and human suffering.

In the context of Peter’s historical circumstances, however, the situation Peter is addressing is what to do about the fear that Christians feel when dealing with those who oppress them. Peter tells Christians to *“honor Christ the Lord as holy,”* which is an echo from Isaiah 8:13, where we read, *“but the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.”* Remarkably, Peter applies language used of YHWH directly to Jesus, meaning that Jesus deserves the same reverence as YHWH. Christians of Diaspora were persecuted because they refused to honor Caesar as a god, precisely because they know that Jesus is Caesar’s Lord even if Caesar doesn’t. By honoring Christ in our hearts—not Caesar—we are affirming that one day even the mighty Caesar himself will bow before Jesus and confess “Jesus is Lord” before facing eternal punishment.

Honoring Christ as Lord in our hearts then, is the solution to fear. Jesus is Lord over all of our enemies. But Peter does instruct Christians to be prepared to respond to pagan falsehoods and ignorance about Christianity by preparing themselves with answers as to why we hope in Jesus. To quote the slogan of the *White Horse Inn*, Christians are to know what they believe (catechism) as well as why they believe it (apologetic arguments for the truth claims of Christianity). Peter adds that it is not only important to be prepared with basic arguments for the truth of Christianity, but that Christians are to make their defense with gentleness and respect. This, of course, fits with what Peter has been saying throughout this entire section. When the truth of our faith is challenged, we give answers, yet with respect and humility.

The reason why Christians are to respond this way is spelled out in verses 16-17. *“Having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.”* Christians should not be afraid of those with power over us because we know that Jesus Christ is Lord. But our response to challenges grows much stronger if our answers are backed up by conduct consistent with content of our faith, including the doctrine that we are to imitate our suffering servant Savior, even though he now sits at the right hand of the Father and will preside on the day of final judgment.

When those who hate the Christian faith curse and revile us, when they pressure us to conform to non-Christian behavior, when they persecute us because we are Christians, the best defense is a combination of good answers to their objections, and a clear conscience—i.e., that we have not sinned against them because they dare challenge and disagree with us, sometimes getting personal. Our good behavior in Christ will put our accusers to shame, and will blunt one of the strongest arguments non-Christians use against us; Christians are hypocrites. It is easy for someone outside the faith to ignore our answers to their objections if we curse and revile back. But is it very hard to dismiss the arguments of those who live out what they believe. Besides, it is far better to suffer for doing good (if that be God’s will) than it is not to suffer by doing what is evil.

In terms of application, at first glance, Peter's historic circumstances seem much different than ours. His readers were openly persecuted, driven from their homes, and losing both their property and livelihoods. Even though we are more "pressured to conform" than we are openly persecuted, I'm not so sure our circumstances are all that different. No doubt, American Christians have functioned as salt and light throughout our nation's history, but there is every reason to believe that our culture is as nearly pagan as Rome's, or at least it shows many similar characteristics—one of which is an overt hostility towards historic, evangelical Christianity.

In modern America, Christians are thought to be self-righteous spoil-sports who reject science, deny people the right to marry and sleep with whomever they want, and who think we alone are right. The reality is that if you identify yourself as a Christian you will encounter similar situations to those Peter is describing. People will curse and revile you because they hate Jesus and all he stands for. We must be prepared to give a defense whenever challenged, and yet to do so in the right way.

The good news is that Jesus is still Lord, we are still his elect exiles, we are sprinkled with his blood, set apart for his purposes, and heirs to all of his promises. And we know this to be true because of a bloody cross and an empty tomb. Amen.