

“Arm Yourselves with the Same Way of Thinking”

The Ninth in a series of Sermons on 1 Peter

Texts: 1 Peter 4:1-11; Proverbs 10:1-14

Although you might expect Peter to instruct Christians to fight back against their oppressors, instead Peter directs us to a different kind of war. Christians must resolve to engage in a fierce battle with sin and not let it reign over us. This war against sin should be evident in the way in which we relate to our brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as those outside the church. Those in Christ cannot live as the first century Greeks and Romans do, seeking to satisfy every bodily urge with little regard to natural law, and with no regard to God’s revelation of his will in his word. As we reject pagan ways of thinking and doing, and prepare ourselves to suffer for our faith in Christ, we are called to love our brothers and sisters in the church, to use our spiritual gifts to serve one another, and we are to learn to live in the light of God’s promises which will be fully realized on the day of judgment.

As we work our way through Peter’s first epistle we now come to chapter four. Peter is writing to a group of Christians in Asia Minor who have been displaced forcibly from their homes by a decree from the Roman emperor Claudius. These elect exiles were facing great uncertainty about their personal circumstances. Since many of them are victims of persecution because of their faith in Jesus Christ, Peter is writing to remind these struggling saints of their dual citizenship—in addition to being citizens of Rome, these people also possess a heavenly citizenship with an inheritance far greater than human minds can comprehend. As believers in Jesus Christ, they have been sanctified by God, sprinkled with the blood of Jesus, and called to live holy lives before the watching world.

Peter concludes his lengthy series of imperatives found 2:11-3:17, with a wonderful indicative in chapter 3:18-22. The humility and suffering of Jesus provides a once for all payment for sin which remits the guilt for all of those times when Christians fail to submit to those in authority over them, or who seek vengeance upon those who wrong them, or who return the curses and reviling of others, with curses and reviling of their own. But Peter also reminds his readers/hearers that the suffering and death of Jesus is the way in which God conquered sin, death, and the grave, as well as all those authorities and powers which seek to oppress the people of God. When God calls believers to positions in life where they may suffer, Christians should not see this as the retributive punishment of God, but as the path to glory—a pathway already taken by Jesus, the savior of, and the example to the Christians of Asia Minor.

As Peter has already stated, Christians are to identify themselves as citizens of heaven, not by a distinctive wardrobe, diet, or by withdrawing from non-Christians. Instead, we identify ourselves through our profession of faith in the Triune God who sent his son to save us from our sins, and in our holy conduct, which Peter has said, is to be honorable among the Gentiles. Christians are to be good citizens, wise and compassionate masters or submissive servants, and when married are to be the kind of husbands and wives who regard each other as equals in Christ. In these ways, we demonstrate our heavenly citizenship to outsiders.

When Christians are called to suffer, or to face the reviling and cursing from non-Christians, or even when we are persecuted for our faith, our suffering is never the final word. Just as Jesus conquered death and the principalities and powers through his humility and suffering, so will we. Peter has made clear that at the end of time, there will be a final judgment when all wrongs are made right, and when the bad

guys finally get theirs in the end. On the day of judgment Christians will be vindicated and rewarded by the same God who has called us to suffer, as will God be vindicated when the world is silenced by the realization that God's ways are altogether righteous and just.

In light of all that God has done for us in Christ, it would be the height of human sin and foolishness to fall back into the licence (not the liberty, but the license) which characterizes the pagan Gentiles of the Greco-Roman world. While the pagans do not understand or dismiss outright the idea of a bodily resurrection or a day of final judgment, Christians believe that Jesus himself will return on the last day of human history to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. For a Christian, death is not the end, it is only the beginning. This gives us a completely different perspective on life from that of the non-Christians around us, a point about which Peter will now remind his readers.¹

As we turn to our text this morning (vv. 1-11 of 1 Peter 4), Peter draws a conclusion (“since therefore” – *oun*) based upon the things which he has just written in vv. 18-22 about the death of Jesus, the resurrection of our Lord and his ascension to the right hand of the Father. The Father's right hand is symbolic of Jesus' rule over all things, including angels, authorities, and powers. In light of this point, Peter writes in the first part of verse 1, “*since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking.*” In light of his description of Christ's suffering and triumph in verses 18-22, the sense is that since Jesus suffered in the flesh, Christians need to arm ourselves (a military term) in the same way, i.e., we must realize that we will suffer in the flesh, before being exalted as Jesus was.

There is a remarkable parallel between Peter's assertion here and a statement from Paul in Philippians 2:5-11, where Paul makes the same point, only in much more detail. “*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” In light of Paul's elaboration of this point, this is how I think we should understand Peter's comment in verse 1. We must arm ourselves with the knowledge that since Jesus suffered, we may experience the same thing. As one writer puts it, “like soldiers preparing for battle, believers should prepare themselves for suffering.”² The old saying is certainly true that Christianity does not provide a way out, but a way through.

Since no one wants to suffer—especially in a culture of comfort such as ours which knows an affluence and prosperity greater than any other civilization in world history—suffering is minimized. Americans often act as though all suffering can be avoided because it reflects a moral failing, and since we are “good people,” we shouldn't suffer. Accordingly, there is great pressure to live in denial about bad times and bad things. But since we live in a sinful and fallen world suffering will come, and we need to be ready for before it occurs, because it is hard to get our theology right in the midst of difficult times because our perspective is often jaded by our circumstances.

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), exported from Logos Bible Software, 4:1.

² Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, Logos on 4:1

We arm ourselves by considering the things Peter has just spelled out in the previous chapter. First, Jesus' suffering served God's larger purposes and was the means by which our Lord conquered death, the grave, and Satan. Second, since Jesus died for our sins—once for all, the righteous in the place of the unrighteous—when God calls us to suffer it is not because of retributive punishment, even though suffering may come as a consequence of our sins, or from the sins of others. Third, just as God exalted Jesus to his right hand, so too those who suffer for Christ's sake will likewise enjoy all of the blessings secured for them by Jesus Christ. A glorious inheritance awaits.

In the second part of verse 1-verse 2, Peter writes, *“for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.* Therefore, when we arm ourselves with the same way of thinking, we add to the previous three points the specific point Peter makes here. The clause *“whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,”* does not in any way imply that we might reach a point of Christian perfection—that we live above and beyond sin. Once again, Peter's comment should be understood in light of Paul's virtually identical comment in Romans 6:7-10 (which again, Paul makes in more detail). *“We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”* To be united to Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection through faith (and which has been signed and sealed in our baptism) means that sin no longer has power over us, in that sin no longer condemns us—because Jesus has been condemned for us and in our place.

This is, no doubt, Peter's meaning here. If we died with Christ who suffered in the flesh, and if through faith we are in union with Jesus in his resurrection, then sin's power over us is broken. To put it yet another way, our sinful life is to be regarded as a thing of the past—we cease from living sinful lives.³ We still sin, of course, but sinful behavior no longer characterizes us as it does the Gentiles. Sin is no longer the rule, it is the exception. We live the rest of our lives, Peter says in verse 2, no longer a slave to the sinful passions of the flesh, but instead we now live for (or in accordance with) the will of God (i.e., his revealed will in his law). We are freed from the curse (death) which sin has inflicted upon us.

Those who are united to Christ in his death through faith, will put to death the deeds done in the flesh. We then rise to newness of life. To be in Christ means a death has occurred—his death to which we are united, so that we can say “we died” with Jesus in his death. To be in Christ means a resurrection has occurred—his resurrection to which we are united, so we can say if we are in Christ, we have been raised (with Jesus) to newness of life. Our sin no longer enslaves us, and no longer holds us in its grip, and no longer condemns us, because Jesus has died for us and in our place, the righteous for the unrighteous. We begin to manifest this new life as we become conformed to the image of Christ, so that the behavior of the Gentiles becomes increasingly abhorrent to us, and no longer characteristic of our behavior. This is what Peter means when he says we cease from sin.

This is the background to Peter's statement in verse 3, which indicates that if Jesus has died for us, and we died to sin, that we must then no longer live as do the Gentiles (the Greco-Roman pagans). *“For the*

³ C. E. B. Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, The Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press 1960), 107-108.

time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry.” Peter’s audience has already spent too much time living as pagans, doing what they wanted without regard to the will and commandments of God. The pagans live in sensuality—they live to seek pleasure and avoid pain. All of life centers around us and satisfying our urges. The pagans let their passions be their guide, rejecting all restraints placed upon them by nature (creation) or by God’s word. But Peter says, the time is past for us to live like this.

The Gentiles live to party—drunkenness and drinking to excess. They think nothing of orgies with multiple partners, or with people of the same sex. The time is past for us to live like this. The Gentiles seek lawless idolatry. They worship false gods, including their emperor and the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods, which are nothing but the figment of the sinful human imagination. The time is past for Christians to live as the pagans do. We died to sin. Sin’s power over us is broken. We have ceased from sin, in this sense. For Peter, this is the direct application of the fact that Jesus has died for us.

In verse 4, Peter now addresses the matter of how we as Christians are to relate to the pagans around us, specifically in light of their hostility to Christianity. *“With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you.”* Non-Christians simply do not understand why we see drunkenness, promiscuity, and idolatry as evil—even though nature and the design of their own bodies tell them these things are wrong. They see in Christians a self-righteous and judgmental attitude because they are afraid of any possible infringement upon their self-indulgence.

And yet, because God has written his law upon their hearts, non-Christians know that what they are doing is wrong, and they sinfully suppress the knowledge of God which is constantly accusing them and bearing witness to the truth. The Greco-Roman pagans were offended by Christian moderation, modesty, and chastity, just as our non-Christian friends and families might be. As the Diaspora Christians were maligned, so will we be maligned. This comes with our union with Christ, who was likewise hated by the world. Non-Christians will resent us, curse us, and revile us.

But deny the truth of God’s revelation in nature and in his world all you want, the fact is that the non-Christians around us who malign us, *“will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.”* Once again, Peter’s focus on eschatology (the end times) comes into view. There is going to be a day of final judgment, when all will give an account unto their creator. Non-Christians can deny this all they want, but as certainly as Jesus’ tomb was empty the first Easter, so too, judgment day is coming, when, as Peter says, all will give an account of their lives to Jesus.

No doubt, one of the greatest struggles facing Christians of this present evil age, is that evil so often appears to triumph, and the behavior mentioned by Peter seems so attractive, especially when the pagans around us are insulted when we do not join in. Why not just give in and take the easy and pleasurable way out? Peter reminds us that the passing pleasures of sin are exactly that—passing. The suffering and persecution we must endure at the hands of unbelievers can be so difficult and can last far too long. But in the light of a final judgment, Christians must consider that their suffering will come to an end, as will all those who deny the truth and who are devoted to the foolish pursuit of pleasure.

In verse 6, Peter now explains, (*“for this is why”*) Christians must consider that *“the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.”* Here again, we find a difficult saying about which there are a number of interpretations. Some contend that Peter is referring to those who are dead in sin, which is an attractive option, but ultimately cannot explain why the word “dead” always refers in the New Testament to people

who have died, and are no longer living. Other see this as a second-chance kind of thing. People have the gospel preached to them when they die, so that they have one last chance to believe in Jesus. There is no biblical evidence for this. The likely view (and the one which fits the context best) is to see this as a reference to the fact that a number of believers known to Peter's audience had the gospel preached to them, and then either died or were put to death by their persecutors. They are dead, yet they still live.

The gospel was preached to them and they accepted it (becoming believers in Jesus Christ), and will be judged according to their deeds done in the flesh. But the one who died for them (Jesus) will be their advocate on the day of judgment, and they now possess eternal life and live on in the presence of God. The knowledge of this would be of great comfort to Peter's readers and hearers who have no doubt heard of (or even perhaps have witnessed) God's people being put to death by the pagans around them, and who were told by those putting believers to death that the Christian victim died for some worthless and foolish religion which promised a resurrection which never came to pass. Peter's point to those facing death (or who have seen it) is not to evaluate such things in light of the historical circumstances—that death appears to be the end. We understand death in the light of God's promise that a day is coming when God will judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. In the meantime, believers who have died in the flesh, now live through the power of the Holy Spirit in the presence of the Lord.⁴

In verses 7-11, Peter explains why he repeatedly reminds his hearers of the fact the world (and this evil age) will come to an end. It is in light of the end of history that a Christian lives in the present. We know the final chapter before it is written. There is coming a time when God will judge world and raise the dead, usher in everlasting righteousness, and bring about a new heaven and earth. According to Peter, "*the end of all things is at hand.*" With the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father, the last days have begun. Human history is in its final period before the return of Jesus Christ, who will bring about the age to come, when the temporal gives way to the eternal. The pagans mock this hope. The Christian lives all of life *corem deo* in the light of it.

But what should a Christian's response be to fact that Jesus will return to right all wrongs, judge all evil-doers and that when he does, we will receive our heavenly inheritance. Peter tells us beginning in the second half of verse 7. "*Therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.*" If the conduct which Peter says characterizes paganism stem from a lack of self-control and a propensity to foolishly worship gods of their own imagining, then Christians should demonstrate self-control and sober-mindedness (clear-headed) so that we don't live in fear and panic at either pagan oppression of our faith, or the possibility of the Lord's imminent return. The prayers of Christians should reflect this thoughtful and self-controlled attitude, not the sinful desires of the flesh, typical of paganism. To quote the well-known theologian and eminent grammarian Joyce Myers, "don't pray no stupid prayers."

Like Jesus and Paul, Peter grounds Christian ethics and the Christian life in the love believers are to have for one another, in light of Jesus Christ's prior love toward us. In verse 8, the Apostle writes, "*above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.*" For a third time in this section, Peter's words virtually echo those of Paul, who likewise connects Christian love to the hope of Christ's return. In Romans 13:8-11, Paul writes "*owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love*

⁴ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 4:6

is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.” We demonstrate our heavenly citizenship by not living in darkness (ignorance of the truth) as do the pagans. Rather, we are to live in the hope of Christ’s return, in light of which Christians are to demonstrate love towards one another.

The phrase “*love covers a multitude of sins*” is an echo from Proverbs 10:12 (part of our Old Testament lesson this morning), where the author reminds us about the wisdom of avoiding all forms of strife, allowing us to focus upon the love of others.⁵ The phrase was used widely in the early church as a sort of proverb,⁶ indicating that when we strive to love one another, we are not spending our time and energy looking to be angry with those in the body of Christ whom we think have wronged us. Since we are all sinners and prone to disputes, the chance for peace within the exile community is far greater when we forgive each other in the light of the mercy which God has shown to each one of us, a love which we do not deserve, and a love which prompts us to love others who may not deserve it.

In verse 9, Peter urges that Christians demonstrate hospitality to one another. In an age before hotels, and at a time when local inns were usually brothels and a hangout for robbers, Peter urges us to “*show hospitality to one another without grumbling.*” Instead of subjecting Christian travelers to dangerous conditions, we are to take them in and provide them with a safe place to stay. In connection to showing hospitality, Peter adds in verses 10-11, that Christians use the spiritual gifts which God has given us as a manifestation of our love for our brothers and sisters. “*As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.*” This exhortation too finds a parallel in Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14.

If you have a spiritual gift, use it for the benefit of others, and for the greater glory of God. Those who can teach and preach, do so. Those who serve, do so. This is one way God’s love for us, and our love for each other becomes realized in the life of the church. As Peter says, these things point us to the glory of God, stirring him to praise God at the end of verse 11, “*to him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*”

What do we take with us from this passage in terms of application? Peter tells us to prepare for suffering as a soldier prepares for battle—a theme which Peter continues to address in the balance of chapter 4. Peter is a realist. If the pagan world indulges every bodily urge, Christians are to demonstrate self-control as well as clear thinking. We must realize that the death and resurrection of Jesus (signed and sealed to us in our baptism) means that sin no longer holds us in a death grip. We cease from sin in the sense that we must break with our pagan past (or habits) and live holy lives in light of Jesus’ death for us and in our place. No excuses remain—neither excuse Christians often use work any more. “The devil made me do it.” No, he didn’t. I couldn’t help myself. Yes, you can. Why? Because Jesus died, the righteous for the unrighteous, setting you free from sin and from pagan ways of thinking and doing.

We are use the gifts which God has given us to serve one another in love, because love covers a multitude of sins. And we are to live our lives in the here and now with our eyes firmly fixed on the

⁵ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 4:8

⁶ Cranfield, I & II Peter and Jude, 114.

distant horizon—that glorious day of judgment, when Jesus returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. On that day we will receive our heavenly inheritance. But those who hate Christ and his gospel—whose religion is to indulge the flesh—will face their Creator in all his wrath.

So beloved, “*arm yourselves with the same way of thinking.*” Prepare to suffer the curses and reviling of others, while at the same time devoting ourselves to serve one another in love. Because Jesus has died for our sins, sin no longer holds us in bondage, and we look forward to that day when our Lord will return to judge the world and grant us our heavenly inheritance.