

## Week 17 - Witnessing Holistically in This Hostile World - 1Peter 3:13-18

### Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:1-12

#### Introduction

I recently ran across an article online that listed the top ten most common fears people confess to having

Of course, the perennial favorite in the number one spot was “social phobia,” which includes a broad range of situations in which people are afraid to interact with others, such as public speaking but even includes going to parties and simply chatting with others

Second is fear of heights, followed by fear of snakes, bugs, or spiders and way down at number 10 was fear of death

And according to the Google searches made by people in Wisconsin, the number one fear in Wisconsin during 2021 was fear of failure

One thing revealed by reading various lists of top fears is the fact that our fears are often irrational and misguided as we tend to fear things in disproportion to the odds that they will actually bring us harm

Take crossing high bridges in our cars, for example

Why is it that many people can successfully navigate streets, roads, and highways without suddenly veering off the pavement, and yet, when they find themselves on a high bridge, they grip the steering wheel in terror that they are going to go through the guardrail and plummet to their death?

Or take the most common fear - public speaking - what actual harm will come from standing in front of a group of people to do what we all do one-on-one or in small, intimate groups all the time?

Of course, there is one instance of interaction Christ-followers tend to fear no matter the size or makeup of the group - witnessing

For some reason - perhaps for many reasons - an ordinarily outgoing and friendly believer who has no problem conversing with anyone at any time about most anything will find their heart pounding, palms sweating, and stomach churning as soon as they realize the opportunity to share their faith with a lost soul is in front of them

As we have previously seen, Peter wrote the letter of 1Peter to believers who were living as sojourners and exiles in an environment that was often hostile toward them, and he has addressed the subject of proper and improper fear

For instance, he commanded that the sojourning exiles “*conduct [themselves] with fear throughout the time of [their] exile*” in 1Peter 1:17

And in 1Peter 2:17, he commanded: *Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

Peter has also stressed the necessity of living properly while sojourning here in this hostile environment and shown how it was possible for his original readers to avoid trouble and live in peace by controlling the tongue, telling the truth, turning from evil and doing good to others, and seeking and pursuing peace [1Peter 3:10-11]

Now, in the section before us, Peter turns directly to the issue of persecution and suffering at the hands of unbelievers and how to witness effectively in the hostile environment we are passing through on the way to our final home

And he begins with the rhetorical question of verse 13 [1Peter 3:13]

*“Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?”*

And, of course, the answer that is implied by the question is “no one”

Harm is not the normal expectation because those who do right are typically rewarded and not punished

Of course, Peter may well have had in mind the idea that no one can ultimately harm the follower of Jesus Christ much the same as Jesus taught in **Matthew 10:28** - “*...do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.*”

But I think, while that is true, Peter is thinking more temporally of being harmed in the here and now

Even in ungodly cultures, the common grace of God results in a restraining influence that results in a common sense of right and wrong and human government that rewards and punishes appropriately so that it should be a rare occurrence that people who do well are punished for it

However, rare doesn't mean impossible and as we are going to see, persecution is possible even when doing good

## **I. Persecution is Possible**

Look with me at the first part of verse 14 [**1Peter 3:14a**]:

*But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.*

Peter recognizes the unlikely abnormality inherent in the possibility that the righteous will suffer as evidenced by his use of the phrase: "*But even if...*"

We see the general truism that righteous living results in good treatment in **Proverbs 16:7** which says:

*When a man's ways please the LORD, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.*

And our general experience is that an upright life is more peaceable than a life of evil

Suffering in this life may well be widespread and take many forms but it remains rare for a person to specifically suffer because of righteousness - but it does happen

And Peter says that when it does happen that those who suffer in such a way "*will be blessed*"

Unfortunately, the English translation makes it seem as though the blessing comes along at some point after the suffering but it seems more likely that the blessing is concurrent with the suffering

And those who are suffering are also possessive of favorable circumstances from God as we see in **Matthew 5:10-12**

Note the use of the present tense as we read those verses:

*"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*

Remember what we saw in 1:4-5 where Peter states that God is keeping our reward in heaven and guarding us for that reward so that we can be so confident of it that we can say we have it now

Since Peter recognizes that some of his original audience may well be suffering in this way, he turns next to instructing them in how to respond to it

Because the response of the Christ-follower to unjust suffering becomes their witness before a watching world

And Peter says that a proper witness is made up of three parts

## **II. Our Three-part Witness**

And the first element of our witness should be brought about by the knowledge that God is blessing and keeping us in his sovereignty so that no true harm can come to us even though what we may endure might be painful

And that knowledge should result in an attitude of equanimity

### **A. An attitude of equanimity**

Equanimity is the condition of being calm or even in one's mind; a state of composure that is not easily aroused and is able to bear misfortunes with serenity

Look at the last part of verse 14 and the first part of verse 15 where Peter gives his readers two things they should not do and one thing they should do [**1Peter 14b-15a**]:

*Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy*

Fear describes a painful emotion or passion that is excited by an expectation of evil or the apprehension of impending danger

A literal translation of the original Greek text here is: “and of their fear be not afraid”

And a good paraphrase for that odd statement would be “Do not fear their intimidation” - that seems to be the sense  
What they are threatening to do to you may be fearful but don't be afraid of it

And don't let it shake you up or put you in emotional turmoil or cause you to be agitated - that's the sense of “*nor be troubled*”

**Romans 8:31** where Paul asks the question: “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*” came to my mind as I contemplated this verse

Peter is actually loosely quoting from **Isaiah 8:12** here and the historical context of that passage is helpful in our understanding of Peter's use of the verse for his purposes here

In Isaiah's day, the king of Judah was faced with impending invasion by the powerful Assyrians

Not only that, but the king of Israel (the northern 10 tribes) and Syria wanted the king of Judah to ally with them and when he refused, Israel and Syria threatened to invade Judah

So, the king of Judah allied himself with Assyria for protection prompting God to send Isaiah to warn him against making such ungodly alliances rather than trusting in God for protection and deliverance

As followers of Christ the temptation will be great at times to make such unholy alliances with the world and to go along to get along in order to avoid the perceived pain that might result from standing against wickedness

In the face of this reality, Peter commands “don't let them scare you or shake you up”

Instead, remember, God's Word doesn't tell us not to do something without giving us a replacement for it, and the word “but” indicates the reversal or contrast here [**1Peter 3:15a**] “*But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy...*”

The alternative to being fearful and troubled by those who wish to do harm is to focus your attention on someone else

And, in this case, Peter says to regard Christ with proper reverence

We find this sense also in **Matthew 6:9** - “*Our Father in heaven, **hallowed be your name***”

We will not be troubled or fearful of men when we have proper reverence for the Lord knowing that he, rather than our human opponents, is truly in control of all earthly events - even our suffering

And when we have an abiding confidence in Christ as reigning Lord and King we will find our fears relieved and perhaps even dispelled altogether

Our witness begins with our behavior and having a calm attitude in the face of injustice is winsome and people will notice when we endure unjust suffering with equanimity

But our stance toward unbelievers cannot be passive or merely neutral and Peter doesn't stop with an admonishment not to fear but goes on to encourage preparation for and engagement in active witness in the hope of guiding the unbeliever to Christ

And Peter imagines the need to respond to allegation of wrongdoing which Christians face from opponents and he says we must have a proper verbal defense

## **B. A proper verbal defense**

“Defense” carries with it the connotation of speaking on behalf of oneself or of others against accusations presumed to be false

We see this sense where it is used in **Acts 22:1** where Paul was being arrested and asked for permission to address the crowd of people who had gathered

And again in **Acts 25:16** when Paul was testifying before Agrippa and Bernice

Since the questioning that Peter envisions concerns “the hope that is in you” he must be assuming that the inward hope of Christ-followers results in lives so noticeably different that unbelievers are caused to ask why they are so different

But it seems that the questioning is more a challenge than a genuine, seeking interest due to the word “defense”

Still, there are often opportunities for witness in the midst of hostility but those openings are often fleeting and the Christ-follower who isn’t always ready to answer will miss the moment

The phrase, “*always being prepared,*” tells us that the time to consider how to answer such questions is prior to being in the heat of the moment

The old adage, “Prior preparation prevents poor performance,” is in force here and every follower of Christ should have already considered the basics of their belief and the facts of salvation so they can answer people who ask what their beliefs are

But, again, we prepare for the unforeseen by preparing daily for what we can foresee and we can expect, if we are seeking to fulfill the Great Commission, that we will have opportunities to share our beliefs

And we prepare by reading and being under the teaching of Scripture and meditating on what we read so that we absorb its truths and applications and see the connections to everyday life so that we can speak about them naturally

But we don’t stop with studying the Bible - we must also study the culture around us

We must listen to and observe the culture around us so that we can sense the objections to the faith that people may present and to discern what might resonate with them about the faith

Then we must look for answers to those things and be ready to address people personally about why we hope in Jesus and what he has done for me as an individual

That’s what a witness does - a witness doesn’t have to know everything about a matter

A witness simply tells what they know to be true

Peter’s command here implies that every believer is capable of making an effective defense of the faith

So we have to be ready not only to defend ourselves but also to present our faith thereby turning the tables from defense to evangelism

The apostle Paul does this very thing in Acts 26 where we find the account of his defense before King Agrippa

So let’s turn there and look at verses 19-29 [**Acts 26:19-29**]

*Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”*

*And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.” But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” And Paul said, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.”*

Paul begins as any accused man must by defending himself but by the end of his appearance he has dared to challenge the king and Agrippa obviously felt the pressure of whether to acknowledge fulfilled prophecy and accept Christ

There is a logical, reasonable basis for Christianity and it is the duty of every follower of Christ to know it well enough to be able to give an account of the reason for the hope they have in their own words using personal examples

The third component, and sometimes the most crucial component, is our behavior

### **C. Continual good behavior**

Having just considered what we should be ready to say now we see the first aspect of our behavior relates to *how* we say it

I'm sure you know the old expression; "you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar"

While we aren't trying to catch flies, the principle holds as we must be conscious and respectful of the feelings of those to whom we are witnessing

And Peter says not only that we have to be ready to provide a defense of ourselves and our faith but that we must do so "*with gentleness and respect*"

"Gentleness" speaks to our attitude and demeanor

It involves meekness and mildness and we must answer people with an air of humility and refuse to use force or haughtiness

Far too often, we believe that we can win people for Christ if only we can win arguments and we get so involved in proving our superiority that we drive them away rather than draw them closer

This happens a great deal when people engage online as discussions become more and more rancorous in an attempt to win with the sad reality is that no one is convinced

No one likes a know-it-all and bluster and braggadocio rarely convince anyone of anything so speak the truth in love and be wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove as you give your defense [**Matt. 10:16**]

Peter continues in verse 16 by saying: "*having a good conscience*" which means more than having an outward veneer of morality

After all, our consciences can be mollified by the culture around us or dulled by sin so it has to go deeper than *appearing* or even *feeling* moral

Of course, Peter isn't implying that we need to be perfectly sinless because that isn't possible but he is implying that we must have a clean conscience before God

That means that we must avoid conscious or willful disobedience and, when we fail in our obedience, we must continually practice immediate repentance and prayers for forgiveness as soon as we become aware we have sinned

With the reason being that it will enhance our witness

I know it will likely come as a shock to some of you, but I have failed to always maintain a gentle and respectful demeanor in my interactions with the lost

But, I noticed that when I failed in that regard and apologized for it, letting the person know that I was wrong in my behavior, it carried a great deal of weight because it is such an unusual thing for a person to do

I wouldn't rely on that tactic too often because eventually people will grow accustomed to it and assume it's just how you excuse your bad behavior but it is powerful when it's necessary

And it kind of touches on Peter's next statement found in the latter part of verse 16 [**1Peter 3:16b**]

*So that when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame*

“Slandered” means to be spoken against or to be spoken evil of

And to “revile” means to mistreat with the implication of threats and abuse

This kind of treatment for conducting one’s life in a righteous manner because of being conscious of Christ, should again be rare but Peter allows that it can happen

But Peter says that a Christ-follower should live so well that their opponents will be put to shame if they speak ill of or mistreat them

Naturally, we recognize that the goal isn’t the shame of those who treat us badly because their shame isn’t something good in itself

But the hope is that their shame will silence their slander and result in their consideration of the gospel

It’s the idea of overcoming evil with good that Paul talks about in Romans 12:20-21

Then, in verse 17, Peter returns to the thought he first stated when addressing the servants who suffered unjustly saying

[1Peter 3:17] *“For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.”*

The phrase, “if it should be God’s will,” again emphasizes the unlikely nature of such suffering

It’s possible to suffer in that way but it shouldn’t ordinarily be expected

Still, it’s better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil

After all, suffering for doing wrong is only enduring what is deserved and isn’t to anyone’s credit

But wrongful suffering that is patiently and calmly endured is so remarkable and out of the ordinary that it serves as a powerful witness that can lead unbelievers to salvation

Then to close out this section and transition to the next, Peter reveals our example in suffering in verse 18

### **III. Our Example in Suffering**

[1Peter 3:18a] *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God...*

We are going to stop there for our purposes this morning and we’ll pick up verse 18 again next week

The beginning word “for” indicates that what follows is support for the argument that precedes it

And Peter reasons that we are blessed by God if we endure unjust suffering for the salvation of others as Christ did

No analogy is perfect and that includes this one because we know that the suffering of Christ actually procured our salvation but his point is that because Christ endured for the sake of others’ salvation we should also be willing to endure suffering so that we can be a testimony to lead others to salvation

Paul stated his understanding of that truth in **Colossians 1:24** where he wrote:

*Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church*

It’s one thing to hear of someone suffering for you and it’s another, more powerful thing to witness it

And the fact that our suffering can lead someone to salvation should be a strong incentive for us to be willing to suffer and have an opportunity to endure and persevere in good words and behavior for the sake of others allowing your testimony to be a witness to your abuser

## Conclusion

Someone once asked the founder of the Boy Scouts, Robert Baden-Powell, the inevitable question concerning the organization's motto, "Be Prepared"

"Prepared for what?"

He replied, "Why, for any old thing."

On another occasion, he amplified a bit on his answer saying that Be Prepared means, "you are always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty."

We fear many things and I'm sure many of us here this morning fear witnessing to others

But what is true of most of our fears is largely true when it comes to sharing our faith - the fear is irrational

It's irrational in part because we are always witnessing whether we recognize it or not

As soon as people learn we profess to be a follower of Christ they are watching us to see what a follower of Christ looks like and what they say so that our whole life becomes a witness

The only question is whether it's a faithful witness

So let me ask you to take a look in the mirror to see if you are "zealous for what is good"

Check your attitude toward unjust treatment

See if you're prepared to give a defense of the gospel and a reason for the hope you claim

Look closely to ascertain if you are able to talk with others about the thing of God in a gentle and respectful way

Determine if you fear God alone and whether your reverence for God causes you to have a good conscience

Do you like what you see?

If not, don't despair; you can fix it with God's help

And once you are properly prepared God will use you as a powerful witness to this hostile world

Let's pray

**Matthew 5:1-12 (page 809)**

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.