

Message Series: Transforming Grace: The Message of First Peter

Message Title: Suffering for Righteousness Sake

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Scripture: I Peter 3:8-17

Introduction

Heretics, atheists, guilty of outrageous crimes, wickedness, and evil deeds, cannibals, incestuous, guilty of impeding the public good: these are just some of the terms used by Romans to describe Christians in the first century. Christians were mocked, maligned, had their words distorted, and at times, threatened with violence. At the time of Peter's writing, it was just beginning to happen but had not yet blossomed into full blown persecution leading to martyrdom. Judaism persecuted believers in Jerusalem but the storm clouds were now gathering over the rest of the Roman Empire. Most believe Peter wrote this letter at the beginning of Nero's reign. Before long, that beast would unleash a great persecution against the church of God when he blamed Christians for the burning of Rome.

But Christians, at least the ones who listened to Jesus, shouldn't have been shocked by the possibility of being treated that way by the world. Jesus, during his earthly ministry, spoke often to his disciples about how they should expect to be treated by those who did not follow Him. He did it so that they would not be caught off guard. Listen to some of the things He had told them: "If they called the Master of the house Beelzebub, how much more those of his household." (Matthew 10:25).

In the Upper Room the night He was betrayed, Jesus told them, "They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God," (John 16:2). At the end of his description of disciples commonly known as the Beatitudes, he said, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you for my sake: rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Luke 6:22). And at the end of his commissioning of the twelve in Matthew 10 he said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household."

The question that must be asked is, "Why." Why doesn't the world just let Christians be? Why do they have to malign and persecute believers?" I think Jesus answered that in John chapter 3 when he said, "this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil." When your deeds are evil you love darkness and hate the light because you don't want to be exposed. When light comes, you resent it and lash out to extinguish it. Jesus had told them that he was the "Light of the World." But in Matthew, he told the disciples, "You are the light of the world," (Matthew 5:14). Now, the world hates us because we are light and we expose the world's evil deeds.

It Start with the Heart (1 Peter 3:8)

It Start with the Heart That's what this section of First Peter is all about. Peter presupposes that believers might be treated in this way at times. At this point, Peter sees it as a rare thing, but definitely a possibility. ("But even if you should suffer for righteousness sake"). If that should happen, Peter tells them how to respond, the Christian way to get even—it is to seek to be a blessing to those who revile and malign you! How do we do that? How do we muster the strength to not revile in return or hate in return? The answer to that is to start where Peter starts in vs. 8 by dealing with the heart. Peter says if you want to be able to respond to life and be a blessing to others, make sure that these heart attitudes are yours.

Responding in Kindness

Responding in kindness to enemies is not a human ability, but comes from Christ ruling your heart. Peter doesn't just give advice governing outside behavior, but starts with the heart and says "make sure you have these five heart qualities." It is interesting to note that they are all social and deal with Christians' response to one another as well as to others.

Five Heart Attitudes

"Unity of Mind" means "Minding the Same Things"

A person's character is determined and revealed by the things to which he gives his or her mind to. Christians have the mind of Christ. This is manifest in two ways: First, they have a common mind when it comes to the truth of God, the Gospel. **Doctrine matters and the idea that doctrine divides is ludicrous.** Blaming doctrine for our disunity is like blaming the eye chart at the doctor's office for my poor eyesight. But more than agreement with doctrine is evident here. **It is also that we share the mind of Christ** (have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus). Unity is not perfect agreement with others on every point of doctrine, but a realization that we share the same Spirit and so have the same attitude."Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus." We are told to be "...eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," (Ephesians 4:3).

"Sympathy"

"Sympathy" has been described as having responsive fellow-feelings. Rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep.

"Brotherly Love"

We are to love one another because we are now fellow-members of God's family.

"Tender of Heart"

"Tender of Heart" has been described as **"quick to feel and show affection"**. This is difficult to develop in our day where every day tragic news stories are repeated so we become accustomed of hearing of other people's sufferings and tend to become hardened. I caught myself recently watching a news story of a tragedy where people died and not being phased, and then a commercial for a dog shelter came on and I found myself broken-hearted over these dogs that had been abused. Where was my heart for people?

"Humble-minded"-

Humility was not very admired by the Greeks; they saw it as weakness. But for us, it should be natural. We are weak, sinful, dependent, finite creatures. This is the only attitude we should have before God. It is the attitude of Jesus who said He was meek and humble in heart.

Are these heart qualities in you? And are they growing so that you find yourself in unity with others, feeling what others feel, loving those whom God loves, quick to feel affection for others, and constantly thinking soberly of yourself?

Our Calling: Blessed To Be a Blessing ("humble mind"-(1 Peter 3:9-12)

There is one way to summarize verses 9-12: **We were called to inherit a blessing so we can be a blessing.** Peter tells his readers in these verses how Christians should get even. These verses presuppose there will be times when we are maligned, reviled, misunderstood, even hated. Peter tells us never to give in to our own vindictiveness, but we are to respond to those who revile and treat us as Jesus did to those who hated him. Remember how we read it at the end of chapter two: "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten." We are to love and forgive those who hate us and threaten us.

Remember how Stephen prayed when they were stoning him to death in Jerusalem. The man is dying and he prays, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Here's a more modern example: Corrie Ten Boom who risked her life to save Jews. She, along with her father and sister were imprisoned in Ravensbruck in WWII. Her father died soon after and her sister also eventually died there. She was released due to a clerical error.

In 1947, she traveled from Holland to Germany to talk to Germans about forgiveness and the love of God. What follows is the conclusion of her message and how she too embraced the message God gave.

"When we confess our sins,' I said, 'God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a Scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there that says, 'NO FISHING ALLOWED.'

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a cap with skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush—the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were! That place was Ravensbruck, and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard—one of the most cruel guards.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" And I, who had spoken

so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard there." No, he did not remember me. "But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein,"—again the hand came out—"will you forgive me?"

And I stood there—I whose sins had again and again been forgiven—and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place. Could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could have been many seconds that he stood there—hand held out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it; I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. "If you do not forgive men their trespasses," Jesus says, "neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart.

But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling." And so, woodenly, mechanically, I thrust out my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!" For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely, as I did then. But even then, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit.

Excerpt from *"I'm Still Learning to Forgive"* by Corrie ten Boom

It goes without saying that you can't possibly live this way without the power of the Spirit.

Peter quotes a Psalm which many believe was used in worship in the early church. He quotes Psalm 34, verses 10-12 to affirm that the blessed life is to turn from evil, especially the evil of speaking evil of others. But before he quotes it he makes this incredible statement again reminding them of what they are called to: "Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you might obtain a blessing."

Peter isn't promoting a works religion (if you bless, you will be blessed). The truth is, we are blessed and that means that we can be a blessing to others (our sins have been forgiven). The reality is, the knowledge of the blessing that awaits us encourages us to bless others, even our enemies. Peter quotes Psalm 34 to describe the life of blessing to which we are called. This is the so-called 'good life'.

This is amazing because Peter knows days of suffering are coming, yet the blessing of the Lord makes days of suffering "good days" in his favor. This is totally contradictory to the way the world thinks. A good day for the world is portrayed in certain television beer commercials where you see a group of people sitting by the water, drinking beer and saying: "It doesn't get any better than this." Contrast that with a good day in the book of Acts: Paul and Silas in a Roman prison with their backs still dripping blood and singing psalms to God (perhaps Psalm 34. Notice that the Psalmist describes the life of blessing as one where the tongue is guarded from speaking evil of anyone. We could add to that what James says about the tongue (James may have gotten his ideas from this Psalm). Read James 3:2-12

A Witness While Suffering (I Peter 3: 13-17)

Peter now moves to the issue that is central for the rest of the letter: Christian suffering. I don't want you to look at these verses as merely a historical record of what the first century had to endure. For the first time in my adult life these verses are very relevant in America. More and more in our country, we see Christianity mocked, Christians reviled for being intolerant, and the government snubbing its nose at the church. ***So let's look at these verses not just from the perspective of what the church in China is enduring, but for us to know how to carry ourselves in a culture that is becoming increasingly hostile to the Gospel.***

Peter begins with a question: "Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good." This is essentially Paul's question from Romans 8 as well: ***"If God be for us, who can be against us?"*** Paul also said in Rom that government is there to protect the good and punish the evil so if we are good, we need not fear.

But Peter is not encouraging Christians to be naive; Christians may still suffer for righteousness' sake. Even if that should be the case, Christians will be blessed for the Lord who bought them will keep them; suffering is not the opposite of blessing. When I read vs. 14 I thought of something: Jesus' prayer for the twelve in John 17. Remember how he prayed for them: "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one," (Jn. 17:15). Just a chapter earlier he had said, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

Later, Peter will say that Christians shouldn't think it strange that they are called to endure persecution. That's because persecution is not the opposite of blessing. Jesus declared us blessed if we suffer it (so did Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. ***Peter would prepare the church for suffering under persecution not only telling them to endure it, but to see it as an opportunity to witness. But the boldness and humility needed for witness can only come about through a fundamental exchange: we must exchange the fear of man for the fear of the Lord.***

Consider Peter, the author of this letter, trembling before a servant girl in the courtyard of the high priest, denying his Lord three times. Now look at him filled with the Spirit, an apostle, standing before the same tribunal that condemned Jesus telling them, "we ought to obey God rather than man." Peter did what he now tells his readers to do; he had gained the fear of the Lord by setting apart Christ as Lord in his heart.

Peter now quotes from a passage from Isaiah in chapter 8. He has already quoted it in the statement about a "Stone of stumbling." In that prophecy, the Lord calls the true believers not to fear what everyone else is fearing—the enemy coming to destroy them (the Assyrians). The only way to do that is by fearing the Lord. Just as Israel was to fear the Lord and not the enemy, we are to fear the Lord, not what our enemies can do to us. Peter embellishes the text adding Christ to where it had been "Let the Lord God be your fear and dread."

Peter says it, "In your hearts honor Christ, the Lord" (literally, sanctify Christ as Lord). When the Lord sanctifies us, He makes us holy; when we sanctify Him in our hearts we set him apart as the Holy One. We recognize Him as the transcendent Lord. To break through the grip of fear we must confess Jesus' Lordship over our lives in more than just mental assent, but in our hearts. It means to be praising Him always in our hearts. A praising heart is immune to the fear of man.

As we draw near to Him in the fear of the Lord we are taken up with his awe and worship. Notice that where Isaiah says "sanctify the Lord God in your hearts" Peter replaces it with "Christ". What a statement about the Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ!

One of the fruits of sanctifying Him as Lord in our hearts is that it prepares our hearts for witness. Peter's statement about witness is connected to the previous statement so that it literally reads, "Set apart the Lord, the Christ, ready always for answer." We need to be ready not only in attitude but in our ability to defend the faith (always being prepared to make a defense). The word "defense" is the Gk. word for 'apology.' In our culture the word apology has a negative connotation but in the Roman world it was used of a defense in a court of law. Sometimes Christians were hauled before courts and had to give a defense (Paul in Acts). But the word applies to defending the Gospel properly whenever someone may ask you for a reason for the hope that is in you.

This is often called "apologetics"; rationally defending the faith with reasonable arguments. This is more than giving your testimony, but understanding the reasonableness for our hope. Faith, for the Christian, is not a blind stab in the dark, but a reasonable and rational divine philosophy. Take creation, for example. There are so many rational and reasonable arguments to prove the Genesis account as opposed to the theory of evolution. Take the resurrection as well. There are reasons that the resurrection is rational and believable. Are you equipped to argue for the rationality of the faith? Of course, if you buy into certain ideas of faith, that it is irrational and that the mind is an enemy, you will be ill-prepared.

But the manner in which we bear witness is as important as the matter. We must be prepared and unafraid to press his claims, but we must do it in humility and gentleness. Over the years, I have seen the Gospel preached by people who are atrocious in their attitudes towards others. When it was rejected, they took pride in the fact that they were suffering for the Gospel, but it wasn't the Gospel that offended people, but the fact that they were obnoxious. Look at Peter's description of the manner in which we are to defend the gospel:

Gentleness is an important characteristic when sharing the Gospel and you are being maligned. Paul spoke of it to Timothy: "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness." The Lord Jesus used it to describe himself. **Reverence is the reason we can speak with gentleness: we are speaking before the Lord and of the Lord.** Having a good conscience may mean one of two things, but most likely both. It certainly includes that the Christian, though not perfect, has been thoroughly cleansed from all his sin so that he doesn't have to walk around guilty.

But I don't think that's the prominent meaning. Rather, he is saying make sure you have a clear conscience so that you are not guilty of the things you are being accused of. The testimony of a good conscience gives power to Gospel preaching. Notice how Peter speaks of this as your "good behavior in Christ." This is not human works of legalism, but the fruit of sanctification. They may slander you but there is no basis in reality because of the way you live before God. Peter reminds them that they may suffer for doing good, if that is God's will, but we should never suffer for doing evil. The reason we can endure it is not just Jesus' example but Jesus atoning death on our behalf.

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Some questions follow provided by Ed Rosen for your use in House Church Group Discussion.

1. Neil quoted verse 8 *"Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind."* He called these "Five Heart Issues" or "Heart Attitudes".
 - a. What does it mean to "have unity of mind"?
 - b. What does it mean to have "sympathy"?
 - c. What does it mean to have "brotherly love"?
 - d. What does it mean to have "a tender heart"?
 - e. What does it mean to have "a humble mind"?
2. Why are the heart attitudes of verse 8 necessary if we are to suffer persecution correctly, or in the absence of persecution, being treated wrongly by either unbelievers or believers?
3. Are these heart qualities in you? Are they growing?
4. While speaking of "unity of mind" Neil mentioned doctrine as being necessary.
 - a. Does doctrine divide, or does it unite? Explain
 - b. How does Paul's teaching in Ephesians 4:11-16 relate to sound doctrine and "unity of mind"?

5. Why must we follow Jesus' example in Philippians 2:5-8 if we are to be of "a humble mind"?
6. What is the only way that we can follow Jesus' example?
7. How does Corie Ten Boom's testimony of learning the meaning of forgiveness relate to Jesus parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18-21-35?
8. Peter says in verse 9 *"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."*
 - a. What does Peter mean by saying "to this you were called"?
 - b. What is the "blessing"?
9. Based on verses 13-17 how is persecution, or being wrongly treated an opportunity for witness"?
10. What does Peter mean when he says in verse 15, "but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy,"?
11. Are you *"prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you"* (verse 15)? Explain.
12. Explain what constitutes a good defense.
13. Why is "having a good conscience" necessary *"to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you"*?