

The Christian in a Hostile World How to Respond to Unbelievers #1

Intro: It is one of the most ironic truths of the gospel. After Jesus in his famous mountain message spoke of the wonderful fruit of a disciple's life describing them as merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, he shocks us by saying that folks who live like that can expect to pay a price for such goodness:

"Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. (Matthew 5:11)

With the Lord and his apostles, it was axiomatic that the life of a disciple would include opposition and persecution. And this theme is an important one in Peter's epistle to the Christians of Northern Turkey.

He has already made clear that Christians will endure suffering for their faith in Jesus.

In chapter one he speaks about how they may be "distressed by various trials."

In chapter two he mentions that they may be "slandered" by unbelievers. Furthermore he suggests that servants may be mistreated by the unbelieving masters; and that suffering is a part of our calling..

Peter's goal was to prepare the disciples for such times. That's why we've called our series, "The Christian in a Hostile World." Peter stresses three things that disciples must do to prevail against these trials.

In the first section Peter says they must remember who they are.

In the second section he urges them to live their lives with excellence so that they may silence those who slander them.

And now we come to the third section where Peter gives practical advice on what to do in times of suffering.

In this section (1 Pet. 3:13-4:6), he raises the question: How should a Christian respond to those who oppose him, not for doing what is wrong, but for doing what is right? Let hear Peter's answers which take the form of a series of observations and exhortations.

Recognize that doing what is right always brings God's blessing, even if it also brings suffering.

Peter extends and applies the previous quotation from Ps. 34. He has urged his readers to remember the teaching of this great psalm--to inherit God's blessing one must "refrain his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile." He must "seek peace and pursue it." In a word he must be "righteous" in his conduct, so that the eyes of the Lord will be upon Him and in God's providence he will love life and see good days. On that basis Peter makes an observation:

And who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. (1 Peter 3:13-14)

Literally "if you have become zealots of goodness" why would that in and of itself result in harm? Generally we should not be persecuted for doing right! But if we find ourselves suffering for doing what is right, that too is a source of blessing.

Peter seems to write this with the awareness of the promise of God's watchful eye over the conduct of the righteous, and His willingness to hear their prayers and reward them with the blessing of eternal life.

Do not be intimidated by persecutors, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts

It's easy to lose courage when evil doers are in the majority or when we teach an unpopular message. We can become intimidated by the sheer number of people who advocate a different viewpoint or lifestyle. We may fear what they might say or do.

Yet our condition is not unlike that of faithful Isaiah and those who followed his teaching in ancient Israel. As a prophet of God, he proclaimed an unpopular message of judgment and his fellow-Jews rejected and resented it. God urged Isaiah not to give in to them in fear:

For thus the Lord spoke to me with mighty power and instructed me not to walk in the way of this people, saying, "You are not to say, 'It is a conspiracy!' In regard to all that this people call a conspiracy, and you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it. It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, and He shall be your dread. (Isaiah 8:11-13)

God was urging Isaiah not to be afraid of the northern kingdom who sought to force Judah to join them against the Assyrians, but instead to fear the Lord who would use the Assyrians as the rod of judgment upon northern kingdom while delivering the people of Jerusalem..

Peter borrows the words God spoke to Isaiah and applies them to the Christians.

And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, (1 Peter 3:14-15)

In times of difficulty we must decide where our loyalties lie, with the evil majority or with the Lord. Who will control our action?. Peter exhorts the Christians, "don't be afraid of unbelievers, but instead set Jesus apart as Lord and make up your mind that you are going to do what He says regardless of the consequences. And then he add an important exhortation:

Be ready to give an answer

... always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; (1 Pet. 3:15)

Treat the Lord as holy involves speaking out about his holiness, making known to others what His word and will is.

When we are challenged, we need to be ready to give a reason for what you believe!

The Greek term "apologia" means a defense of our faith and conduct. It means that Christians know what they believe, and why; and that they are not ashamed to say it. Christians need to act out of the courage of their convictions; and those convictions should rest upon a "thus saith the Lord".

"Taken together, ἀπολογία and ἀπεὶν λόγον suggest that Peter sees his readers as being "on trial" every day as they live for Christ in a pagan society." (WBC)

Tell people what you believe with "meekness" (with a calm spirit) and in "fear" (respect for God and men as well as the seriousness of the situation).

Nothing ruins our example quicker than to lash out in anger and bitterness at those who "get to us." Don't become what is world is!

Keep a good conscience.

and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:16)

The worst thing we could do in times of suffering is to give in or compromise. In trial it is especially important to practice what you preach! How can we persuade others to do what we have not done ourselves! It is by consistent righteousness that we can win the unbeliever. By remaining consistent we disarm the unbelieving critic.

Earlier Peter spoke about how a good citizen could "muzzle" the ignorant or foolish men.

He had urged the faithful to realize that their good deeds lead others to glorify God.

Now he takes the other side. Those who revile the good deeds of the faithful will at last be "put to shame" at the judgment.

Conclusion: We may never know what the future may hold for us. Let us determine to be faithful even when it may be painful to do so and respond to it like Peter teaches us in these practical verses.