

# **ELECT EXILES**

“Bearing Witness to Christ in an Unbelieving Age”

1 Peter 3:8-17

By David A. Ritchie

Sunday, June 21, 2020 (Father’s Day & The First Sunday of Regathered Worship)

## **Scripture Reading**

*“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. 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.” Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but 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, 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” (1 Peter 3:8–17, ESV).*

*Almighty and Everlasting God, we thank you for your word. And we are thankful that today, we have the privilege to hear your word read and proclaimed in gathered worship. Today, we ask that your Holy Spirit would shine the light of your truth into our darkness so that our lives would radiate your light into the darkness of the world. In Jesus’s mighty name, we pray. AMEN.*

## **Introduction**

As a church, we believe it is both our duty and our delight as Christians to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with the world. We want to see people who do not yet know Jesus come to a saving knowledge of him.

But as we continue to delve ever deeper into a secular and skeptical age, that task is not easy. The concept of a transcendent, personal God is becoming less plausible to people in Western society. That this sovereign God could exert moral authority over our lives is becoming more and more offensive. And when Christians make the choice to follow the Spirit of God rather than the Spirit of the Age, they are often misunderstood, mistrusted, and maligned. How could the Church ever hope to endure and grow in such an environment?

Here, it is important to know the story of Christianity. The Church of Jesus Christ was not born in ideal circumstances. Rather, it was born into an environment of imperial oppression, moral relativism, and cultural hostility. And yet, the Church prevailed because of the power of God and the faithful witness of his people.

1 Peter was written just as Christians were experiencing the first throes of public persecution. In this passage, the Apostle Peter shows Christians how to bear witness to Christ before our unbelieving neighbors, even when they are hostile or antagonistic.

The title of today's sermon is "*Bearing Witness to Christ in an Unbelieving Age.*" And we are going to tackle this subject under three headings: *1.) How we speak, 2.) How we suffer, and 3.) How we shield.*

## **Exposition**

### **1.) How we speak**

Not all that long ago, most of us were under shelter-in-place orders. And if there is one thing that I wish we would have done differently as a society, it would have been to quarantine social media as well.

Not only did social media give us an inundation of health news, political posturing, and an endless supply of conspiracy theories. It gave a fearful and frustrated people the avenue to unleash venomous words upon one another in a way that brought grief to my heart.

Now, I am not saying that all social media is evil and hateful. However, social media has served to reveal the evil and hate within our hearts as a society. And because social media algorithms often value the controversial, the provocative, and the incendiary, use of social media often unconsciously tempts us toward a worldly form of discourse.

We are tempted to arrogantly proclaim the rightness of our own views with bravado and pride. We misrepresent and demonize those who might disagree with us, and we impugn their motives. We acquire the likes of those who already agree with us and further drive away and enrage those who not agree with us.

But as Christians, 1 Peter reminds us, we must realize that we have been called out of the darkness of the world. Instead, we are called into the marvelous light of Christ so that we might bear witness to Christ unto the world around us.

As such, Peter is going to give Christians a new methodology in how to speak to one another and outsiders: "*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*" (1 Pt 3:8–9).

Verse 8 gives five characteristics of how Christians are to relate and speak with one another and then in verse 9, we see how Christians are to relate and speak with the outside world.

Christians are to have a “*unity of mind*” (ὁμόφρονες). This does not mean we have to have the same opinions on every trivial matter. It means that we are to have an overarching concern for oneness of spirit. It means that we are to always work towards peace and harmony with one another in the Church when division would be so much easier. It means that when we do have legitimate differences of opinion, we refuse to demonize one another. Instead, we uphold the honor and dignity of the image of God in one another.

Christians are to have “*sympathy*” (συμπαθεῖς). Sympathy means we are intentional about knowing, understanding, and giving care to the needs of one another. In a culture where most people are shouting their opinions, Christians must try to be good, thoughtful, attentive, and discerning listeners.

Christians are to have “*brotherly love*” (φιλάδελφοι). Christians are to view one another as brothers and sisters in the family of God. Our love is to be deeper than our opinions and our preferences because we are united by the blood of Christ.

Christians are to have a “*tender heart*” (εὐσπλαγχνοί). This term for compassion or tender-heartedness is much more than positive vibes. It means we are not so focused on ourselves that we have calloused our hearts toward the pain of others. Elsewhere in the New Testament, it is connected to the willingness to give heartfelt forgiveness and grace to one another, when we stumble, fall, and sin against one another (cf. Eph 4:32). So, as Christians, we do not participate in “cancel culture,”; for we do not cancel the image of God.

Christians are also to have a “*humble mind*” (ταπεινόφρονες). In the ancient world, “humility” was a distinctly Christian virtue. In fact, in the Roman Empire, humility was considered a weakness, and pride was a sign of strength and power. But for the Christian, to embrace humility was to embrace the way of Christ and way of wisdom. The opposite of a humble mind is a foolish mind that it right in its own eyes and cannot be changed. A humble mind is eager to listen, eager to learn, and eager to grow.

This is the relational culture we are to foster among one another that is counter-cultural to the power plays, the pettiness, and the pretense we so often see in the world around us. By practicing radical grace-giving, sacrificial love, and repentance among other Christians, we are practicing for our distinctive witness to the world.

But what if the world attacks us or mocks us or humiliates us? By committing ourselves the way of Christ and the way of grace, we must refuse to repay evil for evil. When we are reviled, we must refuse to revile in return.

We keep our tongues from evil and from speaking deceit. Filthy speech and cursing and hatred must be put away.

We do not seek to “own” or humiliate anyone. Instead, we seek peace and pursue it. We seek to persuade and win over those who don’t agree with us or view us as enemies.

But why? If the world gets to punch below the belt, shouldn’t we get to stand up for ourselves? To this, we must respond: *the Christian manner of life is not modeled after the world. The Christian manner of life is modeled after Christ.*

The church is not the fan club of Christ. We are the Body of Christ, filled with the Spirit of Christ, empowered for the mission of Christ.

We were loved by Christ while we were his enemies (cf. Rom 5:10). We must show that same grace to the world so that in us, they might see the grace of Christ. We must speak words of grace so that in the world hears the gracious voice of Christ.

We are to be the presence of Christ in the world. But when the world sees us, do they see an accurate portrayal of Jesus? Or do they see more often just another special-interest group that is chaotically vying for power?

When we are bearing witness to Christ, how we speak matters, and our manner must not contradict our message.

## **2.) How we suffer**

Suffering is one of the dominant themes of 1 Peter. Christians worship a Suffering Savior who died on a cross. According to the Bible, faith in Christ does not absolve us from suffering. But it does mean that we suffer with hope. We know that our suffering is not in vain. And we know that our suffering is not the end of our story.

In our passage today, the Apostle Peter quotes part of Psalm 34. It is an Old Testament Psalm that focuses on the suffering of God’s people and the promise that God will bring about deliverance for those that are afflicted.<sup>1</sup>

Here is Peter quoting Psalm 34: *“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’” (1 Pt 3:10–12).*

Now, in the context of Psalm 34, the life of blessing was originally envisioned as something that God’s people experience in this life. But in 1 Peter, the context suggests that he is pointing Christians to the ultimate hope of the kingdom of God that will come

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 165.

with Christ.<sup>2</sup> And this future hope is to be the driving motivation for us as we steward life in the present moment.

When Christians suffer, we are not to inflict suffering on those who wound us. When we experience hatred, abuse, and opposition, we are not to add further fuel to the cycle of violence and pain in the world. Why? Because we are a people of hope!

If we believe that this existence is nothing more than matter in motion, then why would we be willing to suffer in this life? If there is no future hope, why should we care about humility, compassion, and kindness? If there is no God, why not embrace violence to create our own justice? Why not embrace power and coercion to enforce our will and make life as comfortable, convenient, and pleasurable to us, no matter what it costs others?

But if our hope is in a kingdom of glory, where death and pain and tears are no more, if our hope is in a kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy, if our hope is in Jesus bringing forth our justice, then we can endure suffering with hope.

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians: *“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal”* (2 Cor 4:16–18).

When we suffer with eternal hope – and when this hope gives us the capacity to love even those who cause our suffering – we bear witness to Christ in a way that disrupts a world that is addicted to comfort and power.

When we refuse to demonize fellow image-bearers of God, when we refuse to perpetuate cycles of hatred, and instead seek peace and pursue it, we become agents of “shalom” in a broken world that yearns for peace and wholeness.

In the last few weeks, I have spent some time studying the life and theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), who was a German pastor and scholar during the rise of the Nazis to power [[show image of Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#)].

Now, Bonhoeffer was a brilliant thinker. He received his doctorate in theology at 21 years of age. He was celebrated and offered opportunities to teach at Ivy League Schools in the United States.

But rather than settling for a life of comfort, he chose to give his life to the German church. At the time, the German church had been taken over by the Nazi party. So, Bonhoeffer helped start the independent Confessing Church that refused to be a political pawn to German nationalism. He helped found an illegal seminary. He was even a part

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 166.

of the resistance movement inside of Germany that sought to overthrow the rule of Adolph Hitler.

And for that reason, he was arrested, tortured in a concentration camp, and ultimately executed, just days before the Allies liberated his camp. A prison guard attending his execution said he went to the gallows without fear or struggle. His last words were, *“This is the end—[but] for me, the beginning of life.”*

For such a brilliant thinker, Bonhoeffer was never able to put all of his theology into writing. But as one biographer suggested, maybe his life and martyrdom – the way he faithfully bore witness to Christ *in his suffering* – has spoken louder than his words could have ever spoken.

How might we be called to bear witness to Christ in our suffering?

### **3.) How we shield**

This last point has to do with the concept of “apologetics,” which is how we defend or shield the faith. In fact, the phrase “makes a defense” in verse 15 is translated from the Greek word “apologia” (ἀπολογία), from which we derive the term “apologetics.”

But Peter shows Christians not only *that* we should be engaged with defending our faith, he also shows us *how* we should go about that task: *“but 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, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame”* (1 Pt 3:15–16).

The first aspect of our approach is that we *honor Christ as our Lord*. We do not engage in apologetics to earn the respect or approval of unbelievers. We do not engage in apologetics to appear smart or intellectually superior. Instead, our apologetics must be motivated from an honoring of Christ as Lord deep within our hearts. We are to honor the name of Christ, and unflinchingly affirm the authority of the word of God in our life and thinking.

Secondly, we must *be prepared to make a defense*. We cannot defend the gospel if we do not know the gospel. The institutions of culture will not naturally form us toward a biblical worldview. This means that we should commit ourselves to understanding the word of God and theology. This means we should attempt to understand the questions people have about God and the Bible. In fact, one resource I often recommend when people are trying to grow in their understanding of the gospel and the hard questions people in our culture often ask is Tim Keller’s *“The Reason for God: Belief in the Age of Skepticism”* [[Show image of the Reason for God book cover](#)].

Thirdly we must *have hope*. When we are talking to unbelievers, we must not only know why the gospel is true. We need to know personally why the gospel is good and beautiful. We need to know why the gospel gives us hope! We need to exude the hope that comes

from a vision of the future that is centered around Jesus. I was reminded of the power of Christian hope yesterday as I watched the *Panhandle Refugee Celebration*. Part of that event included an interview conducted by Dr. Ryan Pennington (of *Refugee Language Project*) with a woman named Diana Mojok [[show images of Diana Mojok](#)]. Diana is a refugee from the Dinka tribe of South Sudan. She fled her home country in order to escape the genocide waged against her people. She fought to get to America, and after she was settled in Houston, the city was devastated by a hurricane. She has suffered greatly. Yet, she is a woman known for her infectious joy. Dr. Ryan Pennington asked her why she has such strength and hope. Without hesitation, Diana said her strength comes from her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. She said Jesus is the only one who has given her strength to overcome, strength to love, and the strength to *forgive*.

Fourthly, we must *be gentle and respectful*. You might be able to berate someone into temporary behavior modification. But you cannot berate someone into spiritual transformation. You might be able to shame someone into silence and withdrawal. But you will never shame someone into an abiding love and worship of Jesus! We must speak the truth of the gospel with our words. But again, our manner must not contradict our message. We must defend the faith with gentleness and respect.

Lastly, we must *have a clear conscience*. During this pandemic, we've learned that oftentimes the Coronavirus can be asymptomatic. But the gospel of Jesus Christ is not asymptomatic. Our lives must be in-step with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ is not honored by hypocritical Christians. The gospel, I believe, must be evidenced through the life I live.

Early in our marriage, my wife and I signed up to work out at a brand-new gym in town, and from day one, the gym manager and I hit it off in conversation.

I had recently accepted the task to minister to college students, and I particularly had a heart for people who were skeptical of religion. And for that reason, I felt drawn to befriend this gym manager. On the outside, some would have assumed this guy was a total meathead. But in reality, this was a man who had deep questions about God and the nature of reality. At night, he would stay up all night reading books by Plato and Nietzsche, and the next day we would talk all about it.

I tried as hard as I could to use our mutual knowledge of philosophy to present the gospel to him in a way that he would understand. I wanted him to see how everything he was searching for was found in the gospel. He would ask me some hard, hostile, and very antagonistic questions, and I would do my best to answer them graciously. Sometimes, I felt that we made one or two steps forward. But then, in the next conversation, it seemed like we took ten steps backward.

I remember praying for him and asking God to give me the right words to say. But after about a year or so, I got discouraged. I thought that maybe his heart was just too hardened to the gospel.

But I was wrong.

One day, after my wife and I walked into the gym, he found me. And from the moment I saw him, I knew something had changed. He told me that he had been waiting for me to come into the gym so that I could pray for him.

I said, “Sure! What do you want me to pray to God about?” He took me aside into his office and said, “I wasn’t sure if I could believe in God or not. But last night, I felt like I was under spiritual attack. I felt tormented. For hours, I couldn’t sleep. But I started to pray, and I felt like God began to help me. I knew I needed to talk to you. Will you pray with me and tell me what I need to do to become a Christian?”

And so, I prayed with my friend. Soon after, I had the privilege of baptizing my friend and even serving as the officiant of his wedding.

This story has always been an important one to me because it taught me something about the nature ministry. Because of my skeptical and academic background, I once thought that the key to sharing the gospel was to have the better argument. But this experience showed me that there is so much more to bearing witness to Christ.

My knowledge of philosophy might have earned me a little bit of credibility to have a conversation with this gym manager, but it was not enough to convert him. Ultimately, he needed his Damascus Road moment. He needed to be confronted with the nature of spiritual reality. He needed to be confronted with the fact that there was more to heaven and earth than was dreamt of in his philosophy.

And when God allowed that moment to happen, my friendship with him and the relational trust that I earned allowed me to show him what it meant to follow Jesus.

## **Conclusion**

In a world of pettiness and hate-filled words, we are to speak words of kindness and love.

In a world where people are fighting viciously for short-term power and comfort, we are to suffer with a hope-filled vision of the future.

In a world driven by shaming others into silence and compliance, we are to honor Christ the Lord when we testify to the hope that is within us. We are to speak even to those who would be our enemies with gentleness and respect.

This is the way of the Christian. For this is the way of Christ himself, who spoke words of compassion, who suffered for his enemies, and in whose resurrection we find hope.

Redeemer Christian Church, may this be the way we bear witness to Christ. May we declare this gospel with our words and display this gospel with our lives to our neighbors and the nations. AMEN.

## **Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities**

1. *Read 1 Peter 3:8-17 and summarize this passage in your own words.*
2. *How should this passage shape the way that Christians speak to one another and toward those who are not part of the church? Are there ways of speaking that are common in our culture that should be avoided by Christians?*
3. *When Christians experience evil and reviling, how should we respond, and what should motivate our response?*
4. *Suffering is a major theme in the book of 1 Peter. How is suffering connected to our witness as Christians?*
5. *Re-read 1 Peter 3:15-16. Take some time to examine each phrase of these verses. How should Peter's words shape the way we defend the gospel before unbelievers?*

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