



Westminster
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Suffering for What is Right First Peter 3:13-17

Most of us enjoy stories with happy endings, endings where the villain loses and the righteous get the reward. However, we all know that real life is not that way. We have to teach our children that fairness is rare. How often have you had to use the phrase, “Life is not fair?” We want justice, yet we live in a world filled with injustice. We want deceit exposed, dishonesty revealed, and truth rewarded. But it often does not seem to work out that way.

This is the problem that Peter addressed in the letter we know as First Peter. He wanted to say, “Do the right thing and you will not suffer.” Yet he knows that it is more often the case that those who stand up for what is right may lose friends, suffer persecution, and be abandoned by their family.

This is how Peter put it in First Peter 3:13-17, **“¹³ Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” ¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.”**

In Peter’s world and in some places in our world, people of faith, people committed to love as Christ loved, who have compassion as Jesus had compassion, good people, they suffer slander and persecution.

The late Fred Craddock told the story that many years ago, before World War II, Dr. Christopher Golter was called by God to do good. He was a gardener and an agriculturalist. He loved people, and he went to China to love people and to teach them how they could better feed their families.

One day he found two baby girls in a trash pile. Their parents could not care for them so they abandoned them and left them to die. These two

children had had been exposed to the elements and suffered from malnutrition, but were taken in by Dr. Golter, who reared them as his own.

Dr. Golter was a master story teller, and when he entered a village, children would come from everywhere to hear his stories about Jesus. Due to his agricultural ministry, fields were full of healthy crops and people were fed. Dr. Golter honored Jesus Christ, and many Chinese people began to love Jesus because of his constant witness. It was not so much what he said, which was important, but it was what he did. With such gentleness he taught them how to increase the production of their crops. And with gentleness he told them about salvation in Christ.

Everyone in the villages loved him even though he was a foreigner. They loved him because of his great love for all people.

Remember the words of Peter, **“Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?”** Who will get in your way if your drive in life is to do that which helps others? Certainly it was not Dr. Golter’s reason to care for people in China, to keep himself from harm. If he wanted to be safe, he would have stayed on his farm, at home in Kansas.

It is true that in our everyday lives, good people are usually kept from harm. If you pay your debts, chances are good that you will not get into financial trouble. If you pay all your taxes on time, you probably will not have the IRS on your case. If you take care of your body, get sufficient exercise and sleep, watch your diet and stress level, chances are good that you will live a healthier life than those who don’t. If you help others, chances are good that when you are in need someone will be there to help you. Peter’s rule is common sense. If you do what is right, you will usually stay out of harm’s way.

“But . . .”--there is that word. There is always an exception to the rule. One day soldiers came to the door and said, “You are under arrest.”

Dr. Golter asked, “Why?”

“You’re dangerous.”

That was their answer, “You’re dangerous.” The man was incapable of violence. He loved people. He loved all people. He loved because he loved because he loved. He could not hurt a mouse. But they said, “You’re dangerous,” and the police arrested him.

You see, you have to be careful whom you love. You cannot just go around loving everybody. I mean, you love the wrong people and you can cause all sorts of problems.

So, Peter wrote in verse 14 of our text, **“But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.”** Well, that is easy to say, but tell that to a teenager who is missing out on the party because everyone knows that alcohol is going to be smuggled in. Oh, how she wants to go, but instead she sits at home being Miss Goody Two-Shoes. Just how blessed does she feel?

How about the father who announces to his family that they will have to cancel their vacation plans? There is simply not enough money in the family coffers after paying their fair share of taxes and a tithe to the church.

Or, ask Dr. Golter just how blessed he is, as he sits in confinement simply because he loved the wrong people.

But even Jesus said it. This concept is not original with Peter. Jesus said, **“Blessed or happy are you when you are persecuted for righteousness sake, (or for doing right), for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven.”**

According to Matthew Henry, “It is here that we learn to suffer for righteousness sake is the honor and happiness of a Christian; to suffer for the cause of truth, a good conscience, or any part of a Christian’s duty, is a great honor; the delight of it is greater than torment, the honor more than disgrace, and the gain much greater than the loss.”

To suffer for Christ is a scary thing. And Peter recognizes this. Maybe with pen trembling in his hand, he wrote at the end of verse 14, **“Do not be afraid.”**

What is it like to be imprisoned because you are a Christian? I don’t know.

What is it like to be in the middle of an arena and there are thousands of people in the stands rooting for the lions? I am not talking about an NFL team that plays in Detroit. I’m talking about a Roman arena and real lions. People are cheering as the lion attacks a living person whose only crime was to love and serve Jesus Christ. What is that like? I don’t know.

What is it like to have Roman soldiers break into your home at night and take your children? I don’t know.

What is it like to live in the Sudan, or other places where governments or rebels will let you starve because of your faith? I simply do not know.

What is it like to be a Syrian, or Iraqi Christian, who, after losing all that is dear to them, live in a refugee camp?

My fears seem so trivial compared to what those early believers and our brothers and sisters in some other places in the world face. They were and are afraid of what might happen in the next moment, and I am afraid of what might happen in the future. I fear that if I give too much, I will not have enough for myself as I sit, watching my high definition television, in my four bedroom, three bath air conditioned home.

There is one thing about fear that is universal, whether it is fear of what others may think, or fear of persecution, or fear of what the future holds: in every case fear stifles me. It keeps me from doing what I should be doing. Whether is it fear of going broke if I do not hoard what I have been given, or fear of what others might think if I tell them about Jesus. Fear stifles us, and can make us counterproductive.

A couple was enjoying an afternoon seeing the sights as they rode together on a tandem bicycle. At one point they were climbing a steep road. Finally, at the top, the woman in front said, "That was a harder climb than I thought it would be." And the man sitting in the back replied, "It certainly was. I was scared to death, and if I hadn't kept my foot on the break, we would have slid down backwards. "

There is another story of a wealthy woman from New York touring the West. When she arrived in Santa Fe, New Mexico, she met an old Navaho Indian with a necklace made from curious-looking teeth. So she asked, "What are those?"

The old Native American said, "These are the teeth of a black bear."

"Ah, I suppose those teeth have the same value for as my pearls have for me."

The old Native American smiled and said, "Not exactly. Anybody can open an oyster. But it takes a brave man to acquire bear teeth."

I guess the moral of the story is that as long as we are stifled by our fears, we will miss out.

I understand the Maryland Chesapeake Bay Bridge is over four miles long and rises two hundred feet above the water. The bridge is so high and long that there are some motorists who, due to their fear, simply cannot drive across it.

Now some may have to correct me later, for I don't know if this is true, but I understand there have been problems with traffic jams on the bridge caused by folks who start across the bridge and then become so afraid they simply stop in the middle of the road. So the state of Maryland offers drivers to drive fearful motorists from one side to the other.

Maybe there is a hint here whether or not this is true, for sometimes when we are afraid it may help to turn the wheel over to someone who is not afraid.

Peter writes, "Don't fear, but in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord." Maybe it is time to turn our fears over to Jesus, and remember that we are not alone but God is in control.

Okay, here is a quick review: According to Peter the best way to keep out of trouble, to avoid hassles and persecution is to be passionate about doing good. But this is no guarantee. Out of you love for Jesus Christ you can do good works and still face troubles. And the only way to make it through to glory is to simply trust Jesus. Know he is in charge of any situation. Honor him as Lord and he will conquer your fears.

And Peter continued, if you are trusting Jesus Christ, and if you are suffering because of this trust, and by faith persevere with joy, don't be surprised if someone asks, "How do you do it? How do you remain so positive and joyful? How can you sit in the waiting room, knowing the doctor is going to fill you with chemicals in order to fight your cancer, and your hair is going to fall out, and you are going to be sick, yet you are still filled with confidence and peace? What keeps you going? Why haven't you cursed God?"

These are common questions from curious onlookers. And what does our Scripture say next, **"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with respect."**

I think Peter is saying, "If you trust Jesus, people will marvel at your peace, and want to know from where that peace comes."

The nurse said, “Week after week, you come to the dialysis center. You are stuck with needles. You are limited in so many ways. I just don’t understand why every time you are here you lift my spirits and make me feel better. Where does your joy come from?”

Another nurse, “Everyone at the nurses’ station wants to know who was that who was wheeled into ICU at 4:00 AM with a smile on his face.”

One colleague to another, “How is it that you bounce back so fast after all the problems you have had?”

A dear friend of mine has a cousin who recently had a case of pancreatitis that landed him in the hospital for six months. His wife never left her husband’s side. She sat there reading her Bible, always positive, always caring for her husband and those who cared for her husband. One day a nurse came into the room and asked, “What is it that you have, that I don’t?”

She told the nurse about Jesus, and the nurse, wanting this great hope, professed Jesus as her Lord.

If someone asked you that question, would you tell them about the hope you have in Jesus Christ?

Are you responding to life in such a way that people will ask, “How do you do it?” If no one is asking, maybe it is time to ask why. Maybe it is time to do a little soul searching. Maybe it is time to look deep within yourself and ask, “Can anyone tell the difference? Can anyone see Jesus’ hope, his love and his peace in me?”

It could be time for some of us to reconsider our priorities. Maybe some of us need to put our trust and hope in Jesus.

One thing is for certain: A heart set on Christ will not fear, but will know the peace that passes all understanding, even in the face of hard times and in the face death itself.

Set your heart upon our Lord, and don’t be surprised if someone asks you, “How do you do it? How is it that you are able to live with joy even in tough times?” Then tell them about Jesus. Amen.

