

“Suffering for Doing Good”

Introduction:

Have you ever been surprised to find out that somebody was a Christian? Maybe they were a friend of a friend, or a co-worker, and you'd known them for a while, and they'd swear around you or tell dirty jokes, or maybe they spent a lot of time checking out other co-workers, even though they were married. And then, somehow, in casual conversation, maybe about what's going on this weekend, it comes out, they're going to Church. Wait what? You're going to Church? Are you a Christian? Huh, I didn't know that. And your whole perception of them is shattered. They're not the person that you thought them to be, even though they certainly acted like it. I'm sure that's happened to some of you before. It's the unfortunate reality of Christians in this world; we don't always act like Christ followers.

Now, here's the real question: Has anyone ever been surprised to find out that you are a Christian? It's not a good feeling; at that moment you are confronted with a truth. You do not act anything like a Christian, and so nobody really knows that you are. I've had that happen to me before. When I was sixteen I worked at Wendy's in Bellefontaine, which, by the way, is not a great place to work. It was a rough environment with some rough people that worked there; don't get me wrong, they were alright people, but they didn't always have the nicest things to say. And I have to admit, I was pretty impressionable and I would joke and swear along with them. And when it finally did come out that I was a Christian, some people were surprised. Not good. Has that ever happened to you?

And if it hasn't, I would still venture to say that many of us, if not all of us at some time or another have acted differently on Sunday morning than we do the rest of the week, whether it be at work or at home or out with our friends. And why? Why are we so inconsistent in who we are? Do we follow Christ or not?

Transition:

In our passage today, Peter writes to the church that our lives should be noticeably different from those around us. He says that if we live in the hope of Christ, then others will see that hope and ask us about it. Others, however, may not appreciate our hope and may attack us for it. Peter says that we may suffer for doing the good of God.

I wonder though, does the American church truly understand what it means to suffer for our faith. I don't necessarily mean that because we live in comfort, we're don't understand what it means to suffer for Christ, though I am hard pressed to feel badly about our struggles to afford nicer televisions and newer cars when children starve to death every 12 seconds. We do face hardships; there are plenty of physical, emotional, and financial struggles in the US alone. But we do live in a country where we are free to worship God as we choose without fear of being imprisoned or killed. So, do we truly understand what it means to suffer for doing the good of Christ? Do we, as the church, live lives so impressed with the hope of Christ that it spills over into our community? And do people recognize this hope, question this hope, and attack us because of this hope?

Here's the truth about being a faithful Christian.

Big Idea: We must live lives so full of God's hope that people notice.

This morning, we're going to explore what it means to suffer for doing good, or for living lives dedicated to Christ, and I would like us to seriously examine ourselves. Are we living lives that exhibit Christ? Is there anything about us that even merits suffering?

Peter specifically discusses suffering in verses 13-17, but before I read those verses I would like to take a moment to look at the context into which Peter was writing. I think that it's incredibly important to know the background of the author and who he wrote to in order to get the meaning of any passage in Scripture.

Background Information:

Though there is debate as to the authorship of 1 Peter, assuming that Peter did write it, he was writing to a church under the reign of the Emperor Nero, who incited local persecution of Christians. This, of course, was nothing compared to what was going to happen under the ruling of Domitian, but nonetheless, Nero was a cruel man who did cruel things to Christians. This is why Peter writes in 1:6 that, "In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials." He commends that they can rejoice in the mercy that came through Jesus Christ, even though some of them might have had to suffer at the hands of Nero. I think that it is important to note that Peter does not assert that doing good means that one would face persecution. He says that "even if you should suffer", meaning that he thought the suffering was not normative. Because Nero's persecution was localized to certain areas, there was no guarantee that one would suffer for their faith. One can see how his words foretold an ominous future, though, as the future church would face empire wide persecution under the reign of Domitian.

It is to this church at this time in history that Peter writes:

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.

Transition: Blessed in suffering? What do you know about it Peter? He may have had an inclination of the horrors to come, but it is certainly a heavy call for one to feel blessed when bad things happen. One hopes, of course, that Peter felt truly called to follow his own message, since, as Church tradition goes, he was crucified upside down. But why should anybody want to suffer for their faith? In this passage, Peter shows us a 3-step progression of how a life truly focused on/dedicated to Christ can lead to suffering for the believer, and why we would desire that.

1) If our lives are lived righteously and filled with the hope of Christ, it will be noticeable to the world.

In vs. 15 Peter writes, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." In this, Peter is assuming that those within the Church are living in a way that other people really think that they're different. Does the way that we act and react to life truly show that we have the hope of God, or are we like the rest of the world? And then he asks the question, if

we are seen differently, are we prepared to answer the world in honesty as to why we have hope?

He continues in vs. 15 by adding the caveat that when we do share about our hope to the world, we must do so with a certain degree of “gentleness and respect.” Let’s be honest, the public face of Christianity is not very good at gentleness and respect. We enjoy standing on our soapboxes and condemning people to hell for getting abortions or being gay. When our faces are beat red from screaming and our signs blast hate towards those who practice things that are against our beliefs, we are not exhibiting gentleness and respect. When we use apologetics and well thought out arguments to one-up evolutionists and atheists we are not showing gentleness and respect. I am not saying that we should not stand up and represent God to the world. I just think that we’ve been going on about it in the wrong way. The public face of Christianity in America, whether we agree with them or not, has tarnished the name of Christ by representing Him as prideful and arrogant.

May 21st, 2011 at 6:00 PM was supposed to be the end of the world. I have to admit that while I gave the prediction no credence, I did look at the clock countdown from 5:59 until 6; I was more interested than anything else. And at 6:00, Harold Camping’s campaign to bring the world to Christ through predictions of the end time fell through, though since then he’s “recalculated” the date, saying that May 21st was simply a spiritual rapture, while the actual physical rapture will occur on October 21st. This is the third end of times prediction that Camping has made; the first prediction was in 1994. Yahoo News wrote that they believed he was not trying to create a hoax or scam; if he would have been doing so, they say, he would not have established such a firm date

which could prove him wrong. I have to admit that I get eternally frustrated when things like this show up in the news. Unfortunately, we love to see the Harold Camping's of the world make their cases and draw millions of dollars, only to watch the time go by and nothing happen. We love to give exposure to the Terry Jones's who burn the Quran in their very small churches and the Westborough Baptist Churches that protest military funerals. America loves to see the drama; unfortunately, these groups become equated with Christianity, leaving the rest of us around to explain their decisions and to defend ourselves against stereotypes based on their actions.

We as the Church have a lot of ground to cover if we're going to come to a point where people do not automatically dismiss us. We are called to answer for our faith and beliefs; that truth is absolutely certain. But we are called to do so in gentleness and respect. Peter does not tell us that we are going to convey our hope to the world through judgment or through protesting, but rather through living a life rooted in the hope of Christ.

Big Idea: We must live lives so full of God's hope that people notice.

2) Because people notice how different we are in Christ, some may choose to persecute us for it.

In verse 16, Peter writes that those who wish to slander us will be put to shame by our right living and right actions. Our oppressors will be put to shame by the right life that we live. This does not mean that they will feel remorseful for their actions. Rather, it means that their social status of power will be weakened because their cruelty was subdued by kindness. They may, in reaction to being "shamed", decide to discontinue their hateful practices.

Again though, I ask, have we actually suffered for the faith that we have? In a town that predominantly claims to be Christian, though a large percentage will not be seen in church on Sunday, what do we have to fear? And yet, even West Liberty is not free from problems. There is alcoholism and drugs; we spend our money and time on frivolous and wasteful things when our neighbors struggle to pay their bills. What if we lived in such a radical way that we were not complacent to the struggles around us? If we truly followed Christ's commands, how differently would we look that those around us and how much could our witness help our community?

In verse 17 Peter writes, "For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil." Duh! Of course it is. We would much rather suffer for doing what's right, for in doing so even though we are subject to injustice, we are truly justified through our actions and lives which flow from Jesus Christ. Of course we don't want to suffer for doing wrong; there's nothing glorious about that, for we are just receiving our just punishment. I'm not sure that most of us are even in positions to choose between suffering for doing good or for doing evil. We all sin and we all face punishment, whether personal internal strife or external struggles with people around us. But most of us aren't facing any serious punishment for the things we do wrong. So, I think that the real question we should ask ourselves, whether we realize it or not, is not whether we would rather suffer for doing good or doing bad. It is *whether it is better to suffer for doing good, or whether we would rather not suffer at all?* Are we even willing to face the potential issues that could come from being a person wholly devoted to Christ, or are we content with people not really knowing that we are Christians? Is

there anything different between us and the surrounding culture? Do we even want to be different?

Transition: It seems like Peter is really asking a lot of us here; Are the benefits of following Christ really worth the cost? But remember that Jesus said “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matt. 11:30) There is something good that comes from all of this.

3) We can rejoice in suffering for our faith because in that we identify with Christ’s suffering.

We were not promised that the Christian life would be easy. In Matthew 10:16-23, Jesus talks about sending his disciples out like “sheep among wolves.” We too are sent out into the world in that same way in order to share the love of God. But we weren’t the first to suffer. In vs. 18, Peter writes, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.” So in our suffering, we are able to understand just a little bit about what Christ did for us. And we know that he overcame that suffering, death, and rose victorious over the pains of this life. And we too know that God will take us from the pain of this life into a life of perfection and bliss. Many of you know and have been deeply affected by the death of Agriculture broadcaster and riverside local Lindsay Hill. There are few things more tragic in life than seeing someone go so early. In her facebook “about me” section, she wrote something that really stuck with me, and I think is perfect for this discussion. Lindsay said that, “Nobody said life would be easy, they just promised it would be worth it.” And she would certainly know with all of the lives that she touched in her short 31 years. And I think that

comfort can be found in that truth. Life is not easy, and it will not be easy. But if we seek to live a life in God's favor, then it will be worth it.

Modern Question: So here's the question that we need to ask ourselves. Are we living in such a way that people notice the hope of Christ in us? Is this hope so noticeable that we are suffering for it?

Mennonite Angle: The Mennonite/Anabaptist Church exists because those that founded the movement felt called to live apart from culture. They did not believe that one's faith should be tied directly to their citizenship to the state, and so they broke away from that. And let me tell you, people noticed. In fact, many, many were martyred for their faith and the way that they lived.

But as history moved forward, Mennonites and Amish immigrated to America where they became known as the "quiet in the land." They lived there and continued to practice their beliefs, but because of the freedoms that America adopted they didn't receive the same scorn that they had. And now, when people outside of the church ask about the Mennonites, the question that I usually get is "Do you still wear bonnets?" and "Do you have a tv?" Culture, for the most part, does not understand the reasons why the Mennonite Church practices what it does. In many ways, we look like the rest of society.

Big Idea: We must live lives so full of God's hope that people notice.

Conclusion:

We don't really want to suffer. The American church has a really hard time with this. So often, popular Christian speakers, ministers, and writers claim that God promises that we will be given earthly riches and health if we only put our faith in Him. A lot of times this is called the

“Prosperity Gospel”. Bruce Wilkinson, author of the “Prayer of Jabez”, uses a very small portion of OT Scripture in which the protagonist, Jabez, prays for God to increase his land and He does, as a springboard to say that if we have faith, God will grant us our desires. The author of 1 Peter, however, views life a little bit differently; he believes that even if we live right lives and have right faith, we are not promised that life will be easy. This was evident in the great Roman persecution that happened during and after his time, and it is evident today in Egypt when radical Muslims attack Coptic Christians. But is it evident in West Liberty Ohio? Is our hope so evident that we stand out within our community? We need to seriously examine ourselves and our faith journeys and ask how we can live better lives so that God’s hope can shine brighter through us. Let us Pray.