

## First Peter No. 18 “A Christian Observed”

1 Peter 3:8-18

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### Text Comments

I'm reading vv. 8-12 again, the text we read two Lord's Day evenings ago, because they are part of the argument extending on to v. 18. It all concerns the kind of response that Christians should make to suffering, especially that suffering visited upon them on account of their Christianity by those opposed to them for it.

- v.13 He is picking up the thought of the quotation from Psalm 34. “Zealous for what is good” harks back to verse 11; and “harm” is similar to “evil” at the end of v. 12.

He is using “harm” in a special sense. Peter has already observed (2:20) that Christians can suffer abuse and loss in this world through no fault of their own. In that sense they can, of course, *suffer harm*. What he means by saying here that no one can harm us is that nothing that any man can do to a child of God can fundamentally touch the integrity of his person or ruin him in any ultimate sense. This is the confidence of God's people through both the OT and the NT: “All things work together for good to those who love God and who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28), a statement that is made precisely in reference to the trials that Christians suffer in this world, especially those trials imposed upon them by the opposers of their faith.

- v.14 Jesus said something similar, of course. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake” (Matthew 5:10).

- v.15 What may not be clear to the reader of v. 15 is that the sentence “honor Christ the Lord as holy” is the continuation of the quotation from Isaiah 8 begun in the previous verse. Isaiah 8:13 reads: “But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.” *The point here in vv. 14-15 is that the fear of the Lord is the antidote to the fear of man.* A proper reverence for the Lord will give courage in the face of human opposition and threats. “...honor Christ as holy” means we are to acknowledge his holiness in our hearts, to give assent in our hearts to the majesty of the Lord, his sovereignty over every human being and every human power. If we know that and remember that we will not be afraid in the midst of trouble.

By the way, we have here one of the many instances in the NT of a text from the OT that explicitly refers to Yahweh being applied to Jesus Christ. Such texts as this one demonstrate as clearly as could be demonstrated that Jesus is to be identified with Yahweh. It is to texts like these, by the way, that you should point Jehovah's Witnesses if you find yourself in conversation with them. What we are taught in the New Testament is that Jesus is Yahweh himself, or, in the old translation, Jehovah himself, precisely what Jehovah's Witnesses deny.

- v.16 This is the same exhortation Peter made in 2:12, but now in a negative form. They will either glorify God for your good works or be ashamed of themselves for vilifying you for what everyone knows is good behavior.
- v.17 Again a repetition of the point made in 2:20. The “if that should be God's will” refers to the suffering, not to the doing good.
- v.18 For the third time in the letter to this point, a moral exhortation is based on the work of Christ as our Savior, 1:15ff.; 2:21ff. being the other two. And in this case we gather up both the thoughts of the previous two cases: by suffering for doing good Christians both identify with Christ and follow in his steps. But they may do so confidently, because of Christ's victory over evil and the certainty of their eventual triumph and vindication in him. They have nothing to lose by doing good that produces hardship for them, for it pleases Christ in the present and they already have right and title to an inheritance in heaven and so no opposition can keep them from it (the thought with which this section finishes in v. 22).

Now, as I have already mentioned, Peter is here returning to themes already introduced in the letter. There is nothing unusual in that. The Bible is very repetitive. Its great themes are few and it hammers away at them and examines them from a variety of different angles. But at the same time Peter is now concentrating on the theme he has so far only mentioned. The trials, the persecution these Christians were facing and to which Peter has made allusion previously now take center stage. And the arguments that follow are offered to console and to strengthen the believers in the face of their trials. *He begins in these verses by speaking of the confidence with which a godly man of faithful life can face the opposition of the world.*

We have considered this subject briefly before in this series of sermons, as Peter has raised the same points in largely the same way twice already in his letter. But the most important things must be heard more than once. But there are differences, elaborations here that should be noticed especially. In his repetitions, Peter is also building his case, adding argument and explanation. And the new thought here is the one we find in v. 15:

“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...”

The word “answer” is the word “defense” or “apology.” This isn’t “apology” in the sense of acknowledging a wrong and seeking forgiveness; this is “apology” in the sense of an argument on behalf of a position or a defense such as one might make in court regarding charges that have been brought against him. Think of the term “apologetics” as used in Christian thought. It means the defense of the faith, a reasoned argument for Christian belief. But the word can also be used, in a much less formal sense. An apology can also be the everyday answer we give to people who disagree with us or condemn us. In an interesting use of the same word in 2 Corinthians 7:11, Paul refers to the godly sorrow of the Corinthians, provoked by his stern first letter, in which he had condemned them for various sins, and what that godly sorrow had produced in them: what earnestness, what “eagerness to clear yourselves...” That phrase “eagerness to clear yourselves” is this same word “apology”, “defense”, or “answer.”

In other words, rather than fearing unbelievers and their opposition, Christians should gently and respectfully, but clearly and forthrightly respond to their objections, seek to clear them, and to answer their questions about our faith. Now, lest we miss the practical importance of this exhortation, let's put it in our own present context. We, you and I, are being slandered today in a way we never have been in our culture to this point; we are reviled and precisely because we are followers of Christ. Have you seen the yard signs and bumper stickers that read "Hate has no Home Here"? To what are they referring? Who is guilty of the hate that is being condemned? Well, *we are!* Certainly, President Trump is and the Republican Party. But it goes deeper than that and reflects a worldview that was firmly in place long years before Mr. Trump was elected president.

For centuries, indeed, the idea has been developing, picking up steam if you will, that the human self is sovereign. As God has receded from view in western life, the self has filled the empty space. And now, as a perfectly predictable result, self-identify, self-actualization has become the new religion of the western world, its most fundamental commitment. Transgenderism is just a symptom of this fundamental transformation of worldview, of basic belief about human life. If you have a male body but think yourself a woman, then you are a woman, and no amount of pointing to the obvious physiological and chromosomal evidence need change your mind. Indeed, even to point to such evidence is to condemn yourself as oppressive, bigoted, and hateful. This, of course, has been a long time coming, but ideas have consequences and will in time exact their revenge. Descartes principle, first formulated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, "I think, therefore I am," placing the human self at the center of reality, would eventually become "I think I am a woman, therefore I am." The self is the center of meaning and the supreme authority in human life. Once that idea was embraced by the academy and then by the political class, it became the law of the land.

In our day in the western world oppression is usually no longer actual objective disadvantage: poverty or slavery or economic powerlessness; it is psychological, any impediment to a person being or becoming what he or she desires to be. The sexual revolution was, of course, an important factor in speeding up these profound developments and in sexualizing the most important of them. Sex is no longer an activity in which we engage as human beings; it is the defining activity of human life. Sex is who we are! And nowadays, anyone who disagrees with this, is hateful, a purveyor of oppression. So, if you are someone who does not agree that gender is a self-constructed identity – plastic and subject to our own whims – if you do not accept that everyone has an absolute right to define himself or herself as he or she pleases, you are the person in view when someone places a sign on his front lawn that reads: "Hate Has No Home Here."

But Christians, of course, do not and cannot agree with this understanding of human life. The identity of a human being is defined by the fact that he or she is made in the image of God. *That fact* both exalts the dignity and importance of human life in a way that western thought no longer can and sets definite limits to it. Our life is not ours to define as we please. It is not ours to do with what we wish. It is a gift of God who made it for a purpose. [The above from Carl Trueman, "Hate Has No Home Here," *New Horizons* (March 2018) 8-9]

We are stunned at how rapidly this new thinking has been adopted by so many in our culture and find it hard to believe that people should despise us for believing what, after all, virtually all human beings at least to some significant extent have always believed about the nature of human life. But such is our strange historical moment.

But, remember, it was no different for Christians in the Greco-Roman world of the first century. The controversies were not the same, but the fundamental issue was profoundly the same. To believe that there was but one God in a world defined by its polytheism was outrageous to folk of that time. It was also unpatriotic – it struck at the nature of loyalty to the Roman state which was in many respects founded on the assumption of the existence of these many gods – and deeply subversive of the common good. Christians were attacking the very foundations of the social fabric, so much of which fabric had to do with the homage being paid to these many gods, the temples that could be found everywhere in the Greco-Roman world and so on. Christian morality was as ridiculous to them as Christian theology. That world was a cruel world, it was an oppressive world, but it was *their* world and they were not only used to it, they couldn't imagine a different one. They ridiculed Christians for their stupid ideas, many ideas that even unbelievers still today think self-evident. So, if Romans had yard signs, they too would have read “Hate Has No Home Here” and they would have been directed at people like the Christians Peter was writing to.

So, what were they to do? They were convinced of truths that were disgusting to the people around them. Well, says Peter, give a reason for what you believe and how you live – all the more when your behavior prompts a question from an unbeliever – give that answer gently and respectfully, and conduct yourselves in a way that is impossible for unbelievers not to acknowledge to be good, kind, and faithful.

Christians – as we all know and to our embarrassment – have too often made their behavior distinctive in the wrong ways. We know that. There is a story in the biography of Charles Spurgeon the great preacher of 19<sup>th</sup> century London. A critic observed that “Spurgeon is no better than other people; I see him every day on the top of a bus, smoking among all the other men.” [I. Murray, *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism*, 33] Spurgeon was a cigar smoker, if you hadn't known. And to this man that made him just like everyone else. But we *are* like everyone else in many ways. We dress in the same clothes, we eat the same food, we work at the same jobs, we live in the same houses, and so on. Peter is not talking about such things.

But honesty, faithfulness, generosity, love, humility, gentleness: these are all traits that the world must and will recognize and its conscience must respect, however otherwise it does not wish to do so when such traits are characteristic of the behavior of people they disagree with or even despise. Being made in God's image as mankind is, the witness of their own hearts will commend a faithful Christian life in many ways as the life that all men and women ought to live. *Mother Teresa was revered in our day by large numbers of people who would repudiate root and branch the very convictions that made Mother Teresa who she was.* She could get away with admonishing the American political class at the annual presidential prayer breakfast for its support of abortion because no one could say of her that she was nothing but a right-wing bigot!

When in the fourth century, Julian the Apostate, the nephew of Constantine, who wanted to turn back the clock and restore paganism to the status of the “official religion of the empire,” admitted to his advisers that paganism's problem was that it fared poorly in comparison with Christianity; when he admitted that the generosity of Christians and their bravery in the face of sometimes lethal persecution had won for the Christians a great reputation in the empire he was, as a pagan, admitting the validity of Peter's advice to these Christians. That is exactly what happened at many times and

in many places. Unbelievers reviled the Christian's behavior, but that behavior was such that the criticism and contempt was utterly unconvincing. It will always be so when people who behave poorly condemn those who behave well!

For, you see, this is not just being nice. Lots of people are nice, though fewer are than are taken to be. It isn't even just being honest or kind. It is those things of course, and such things matter immensely in a world that is often cruel, dishonest, and unjust. But ours is a life, a behavior, a character that is genuinely unnatural – it flies in the face of the strongest inclinations of the human heart – to fear death, to think vengefully of those who mistreat us, to curse those who curse us.

Christians rest on a completely different foundation, live according to a completely different principle, and *that changes everything*. Their knowledge of Jesus Christ, of salvation, and of the destiny that lies before them liberates them to live very differently, to live with hope and with a love that transcends even the hatred and cruelty of men. And that foundation, that principle, is the saving love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who gave himself, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God. It is not only that Christ set us an example of loving our enemies by loving us when we were his enemies, but in saving us from sin and death, in granting us an eternal inheritance with the saints in heaven, and in promising us his care while we are in this world, he liberated us from having to protect ourselves from others, or having to grasp for every advantage, every pleasure, every satisfaction of this world while we are in it, for fear that when we leave this world we shall have no more. When you are a pilgrim and know that you will soon be in the Heavenly City, the difficulties of the way do not dismay you and certainly are not sufficient to sacrifice your character, to make you give up the deepest and most precious commitments of your life, the very commitments that put you on that road in the first place.

As Pascal put it:

“There is [even] some pleasure in being on board a ship battered by storms when one is certain of not perishing.”

Winston Churchill gave an unbelieving witness to the same experience, in a letter home after some military action in which he was involved in Cuba as a young soldier: “There is nothing more exhilarating than to be shot at without result.” You read these verses, you ponder them in your mind, and you realize that the Christian life is really a mighty thing, that it is to be lived high above the ground, and, of course, founded on such principles and powers as it is, such promises and such a mighty love as it is, it is to be remarkably different than the life of worldly people who do not know Christ and have not experienced his love and do not have the sure hope of the life to come. *I consider it one of my chief tasks as your minister, constantly to remind you of this; never to let the Christian life seem to you an ordinary or unremarkable thing.*

Let me illustrate this in this way. In 1969 Simon Wiesenthal published his famous book *The Sunflower*. Wiesenthal, you remember, was the Jew who, having survived a Nazi concentration camp, devoted the rest of his life to hunting down Nazi war criminals. *The Sunflower* is about an encounter he had, while a concentration camp inmate, with a dying Nazi soldier named Karl. Wiesenthal had a penchant for invention, so we cannot be sure that *The Sunflower* tells a true story, but that such a story or something very like it actually happened is hardly difficult to believe. As

Wiesenthal tells the story he was part of a cleaning detail assigned to a makeshift hospital for wounded German soldiers. As he went to the hospital with his detail, he would pass a cemetery for German soldiers in which each grave was decorated by a sunflower. He could not help but reflect on the difference between the treatment of German soldiers who had died and that meted out to his fellow Jews. Individual graves decorated by sunflowers vs. mass graves, unmarked, in which the emaciated victims of the purest cruelty were unceremoniously dumped as so much refuse.

One day at the hospital Wiesenthal was ordered by a nurse, indeed a nun, to follow her into the building. He was led to a room where lay a 21-year-old Nazi soldier named Karl, his body wrapped in bandages, including his head and eyes. The young soldier was barely able to speak but before he died he wanted desperately to confess a crime that had been torturing his memory, a crime he had committed against Jews and so he felt must be confessed to a Jew. He wanted to confess his shame at having become a Nazi. Still more he wanted to confess his having killed a family of Jews trying to flee a building, crammed with hundreds of Jews, which German soldiers had set afire. He could not get the faces of that family out of his mind. Actually, he told Wiesenthal, he had received his wounds, mortal wounds as it turned out, in a later battle in which he could not bring himself to shoot another group of Jews. While he stood there, unmoving, a shell exploded nearby that took his sight immediately and eventually his life.

As Wiesenthal listened, he tells us later in his book, he realized the authenticity of the confession he was hearing even as he was repelled by the story that Karl told. But he could not forget the sunflowers in that neat cemetery and the mass graves of his fellow Jews and the fate that was, most probably, to befall him as well. Karl was asking for forgiveness, but should Wiesenthal give it to him? Between the two of them, Wiesenthal wrote, there seemed to rest a sunflower. “At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room.”

Interestingly, Wiesenthal remained troubled by that conversation and his failure to extend forgiveness to Karl. After the war he took time to visit Karl’s mother, wanting to find out more about his character. What he learned only confirmed for him the tone of sincerity and truthfulness he had heard in Karl’s confession. He ends his book with a question, not an answer, “Ought I to have forgiven him?” Interestingly, in the later edition of the book, the second half contained the comments of some 53 individuals – rabbis, Christian theologians, politicians, media members, and the like – their observations and conclusions, and their answer to his final question. Of the 53, 34 said that Wiesenthal should not have forgiven Karl, 10 said that he should have, and nine remained uncertain.

Now, no one who has not suffered as Wiesenthal did, should venture to reproach him. Perhaps especially a Christian when many who visited that terrible evil on the Jews were folk who would have identified themselves as Christians, however hypocritically. That is not my point. And that is not Peter’s point. It is not what I should tell someone else to do that is of the greatest importance. It is what I myself should do. *How I ought to respond to cruelty directed at me*. My point is simply to say that faith in Jesus Christ must, absolutely must, fundamentally reshape one’s thinking about such a question and one’s answer to it. And the answer must of course be, “Yes, I must forgive even such a man, even who has done such a thing to me or to those I love.” I must love that man; indeed, must love him even if he continues to be my enemy and never expresses remorse. A Christian’s life must rise high above the principles of self-protection and vengeance that animate the lives of other

men.

I have used before the story I took from Prof. Geoffrey Wainwright, the ecumenical Methodist Liturgical Scholar, late of Union Seminary in New York City, and from his book *Doxology*, which is a brilliant work of systematic theology written from the perspective of Christian worship.

“A Turkish officer raided and looted an Armenian home. He killed the aged parents and gave the daughters to the soldiers, keeping the eldest daughter for himself. Some time later she escaped and trained as a nurse. As time passed, she found herself nursing in a ward of Turkish officers. One night, by the light of a lantern, she saw the face of this officer. He was so gravely ill that without exceptional nursing he would die. The days passed, and he recovered. One day, the doctor stood by the bed with her and said to him, ‘But for her devotion to you, you would be dead.’ He looked at her and said, ‘We have met before, haven't we?’ ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘we have met before.’ ‘Why didn't you kill me?’ he asked. She replied, ‘I am a follower of him who said “Love your enemies.”’” [434]

Two very different responses to terrible evil and persecution. And Jesus Christ made the difference in those responses. The only perfect man who ever lived, loved his enemies and suffered their cruelty without repaying evil for evil, insult for insult. What is more, he saved his people from eternal woe precisely by loving them when they were *his* enemies, precisely by returning good to their evil, a boundless love for their hatred, generosity greater than can be conceived for their ungrateful and hard-hearted indifference. No one who ponders Christ's example can question the rightness of that nurse's behavior, Christ-like as it was. No Christian can refuse to forgive, to love others, without seeming to claim that his or her own sins against Christ were not as serious as the sins others have committed against him or her.

And no one who ponders human nature and human experience can wonder at all that the Turkish officer would ask the woman why and how she could have done such a thing as she did for such a man as he had been to her. And that is why, with all respect to Mr. Wiesenthal, his moral quandary at the end, easy as it may be to understand and to sympathize with, never provoked anyone to ask the reason for the hope that he had.

Jesus said in John 17 that the world would gather from the love of Christians for one another that there is something genuinely supernatural at the root, something genuinely supernatural about Christ, that his followers should live and love in such a way. But, still more, he has told us here, through his apostle, that the world will gather that there is something very much needing an explanation when Christians respond to suffering, especially suffering visited upon them by those who oppose them as Christians, with meekness, humility, love, blessing, kindness, patience, and hope. *People who live according to the principles and powers of this world do not respond to evil and insult in such a way.*

The Lord has given the world, in a sense, a right to pass judgment on the integrity and authenticity of our Christian living. Does our love for one another force the world to reckon with the true nature of Jesus Christ? Does our reaction to the unkindness of others force them to wonder where our life of hope, patience, gentleness, and courage comes from? Are we producing such responses in the

people around us? When they accuse us of hate, is our love, gentleness, and solid thinking the unspoken refutation of their accusation? If only we will always and every day honor Christ the Lord as holy, it will be so. Such a life is good for us – to live as Christ would have us live, to identify with him and to follow his example – but such a life is also good for them, our enemies. It is in many cases it is the only argument they cannot ignore.