



ELECT EXILES – 1 PETER

FEARLESS FEAR

1 Peter 3:13-22

May 16, 2010

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¹³Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?

¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵but 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, ¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

¹⁸For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. ²¹Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

Introduction

Perhaps you have had something like the following experience. It's a Saturday afternoon, and you are getting your hair cut. There you are enjoying some pleasant conversation with the hair stylist, when all of sudden she launches into a description of her mother-in-law whom she says is, in a somewhat irritated tone, "very religious." Noticing you look away and slow to respond, she quickly adds, "You know, one of those born-again Christian types," just in case you didn't understand what it meant to be "very religious."

At which point, you feel a strong prompting to testify to the fact that *you yourself* are an evangelical Christian and a committed follower of Jesus. Yet, you don't say anything, because at just that same moment you find yourself overtaken by another feeling: call it anxiety or

embarrassment or perhaps even *fear*. Instead, you simply offer her a sympathetic smile and say something understanding in return like, “Hmm, is that right?” Then, out of courtesy to the other clients sitting close by—all of whom, you realize, are now listening intently to your conversation—you redirect the conversation to a less provocative topic like the weather.

Failing to speak up for Jesus Christ because of fear; it is a very common Christian experience. Every single week each one of us has dozens of different opportunities to speak about our hope in Jesus Christ, whether in the classroom or the conference room, whether at the barbershop or the beauty salon, whether on the phone with a friend or over the fence with a neighbor. Yet more often than not we find that the fear of what others might think, how they might respond, causes us instead *to stay silent*.

Today’s passage speaks to this experience of fear that causes Christians to keep silent instead of speaking up for Christ. If you think we live in a culture where it is intimidating to testify to your hope in Jesus Christ, it was ten times as intimidating for Christians living in the first century, those whom Peter addresses in this passage. Yet what does he say to these “elect exiles” living in a hostile environment? “Have no fear of them, nor be troubled” (3:14).

You see, this passage says that Christians are not to fear others in a way that would cause them to keep silent. Instead, Christians are to *fear Christ*. That is the alternative this text calls for: not to fear others but to fear Christ. Or, as Peter puts it, “in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy” (3:15).

Here Peter is literally quoting from the Old Testament, from the Prophet Isaiah. The situation was dire in Israel at the time; they were threatened with an invading army. Yet in the face of this massively intimidating threat, the Lord commands Isaiah: “do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread” (8:12-13).

The Apostle Peter has gone to the Prophet Isaiah, then, to tell Christians like you and me not to fear others—regardless of how intimidating they may be. Instead, the Lord Jesus Christ, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. Do not let what others think of you be your chief concern; let what Christ thinks of you be what is ultimately important. Do not worry about impressing others; seek to impress Christ. Do not hold the opinion of others in such high esteem; instead, hold Christ himself, and his opinion of you, in the highest esteem. Do not be silenced because of your fear of other people; be emboldened because of your fear of Christ. This is what it means to “in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy” (3:15).

The alternative to fear, then, is fear. The Christian is to be fearless before others, yet always rightly fearing Christ. And so the call of this passage, the burden of this message, and the vision of God for your Christian life is this: *fearless fear*.

But what does it look like for a Christian to have fearless fear: to not fear other people’s opinions of us—what they might think, what they might say, what they might do—and yet to properly fear Christ?

A Ready Defense

As this passage says, fearless fear causes Christians, first of all, to have *a ready defense*. Christians are always to be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason

for the hope that is in you” (3:15). Notice that while this verse is often referred to as a support for apologetics, the point is not so much that a Christian should have an argument for the rationality of Christianity close at hand. Instead, what is called for is that the Christian would have a *compelling explanation*—especially in the face of misunderstanding or criticism or doubt—of the reason why it is that you hope in this person called Jesus of Nazareth. Not so much an argument, then, but a testimony, a story, a narrative you can tell about why you have abandoned all other hopes to place your hope fully in Jesus Christ.

Christians are to be always prepared, this passage says, to offer a defense of the hope we have in Christ. For, you see, a proper fear of Christ will cause you and me to keep who Christ is and what Christ has done *always in view*. When you rightly fear and reverence and esteem Christ Jesus, you realize *what he’s done for you*. “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (3:18). You realize Christ has died for your sins on his cross; he’s paid the infinite price for you, that he might forgive you, cleanse you, and bring you to God himself. You also recognize who Jesus Christ is in himself: not some religious hero or enlightened spiritual guru – Jesus Christ is the one “who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him” (3:22). He is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth; all things exist for him and are ultimately subservient to him.

When you have the kind of fearless fear called for in this passage, you’re always ready to say good things about Jesus Christ wherever you are and in whatever situation you find yourself: at work or at school, at the mall or on the phone, with friends over dinner or with strangers in the park. For if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, your life is always ‘on trial’; you’re always serving as a ‘witness’ in this world. That is, after all, precisely what Jesus has called you to: “And you will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

All of us to need to realize, then, that if we find that we don’t have much to say to others about Jesus, then we probably don’t have Jesus much on our mind or in our heart. If he’s truly your treasure when you’re alone, he’ll be your treasure when you’re with other people. And if you’re regularly speaking to him in private, you’ll not find it hard to speak about him to others in public.

So, too, in order to have a ready explanation of our Christian hope, let us fill our minds with the great things Jesus Christ has done for us. The Bible’s full of them, of course. Get to know them like the back of your hand. This should mean, practically speaking, that you will have memorized, not simply a canned ‘gospel presentation,’ but a handful of choice passages of Scripture that speak about Jesus in ways that have been meaningful to you. Filling your heart and mind with the works and words of Jesus is the best way to be equipped to make a ready defense for the hope that is in you, even the next time getting your hair cut.

A Respectful Defense

Yet, at this point, some of you may be tempted to draw the wrong conclusion from what this passage is saying or from what I’m saying. You may even be feeling a bit nervous, that fearless fear means being an aggressive and salesman-like in your sharing your faith. Perhaps you are worried that I am going to advise you the way one author advises would-be evangelists in his book *Soul-Winning Made Easy*. Here is his advice: “Get your prospect alone.” Then, he adds,

Lay your hand firmly on the subject's shoulder (or arm) with a semi-commanding tone of voice, and say to him: 'Bow your head with me.' Note: Do not look at him when you say this, but bow your head first. Out of the corner of your eye you will see him hesitate at first. Then, as his resistance crumbles, his head will come down. Your hand on his shoulder will feel the relaxation and you will know when his heart yields. Bowing your head first causes terrific psychological pressure.¹

Rest assured fearless fear that causes the Christian to speak up for Christ does not mean applying "terrific psychological pressure" to anyone! And it certainly does not mean being obnoxious! Just because a Christian does not fear the opinion of others does not mean a Christian can be manipulative or rude or inconsiderate toward others.

This is precisely why this passage says it is not enough simply to have a ready defense for the hope that is in us; we must also, secondly, have a *respectful defense*. Yes, have a ready defense and be bold in speaking up for Christ. Yet, as Peter is quick to add, "do it with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15). Underline those two words.

You see, a proper fear of Christ causes the Christian to properly respect every person, not just other Christians, but non-Christians as well. This is because you realize that every person has been made in the image of God and is therefore an object of the Creator's provision and care. "For," as Jesus says, "he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good" (Matt. 5:45). You also realize that your battle as a Christian is not ultimately against the non-Christian—he or she is not your enemy. "For," as the Apostle Paul says, "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). Furthermore, you know that a non-Christian *cannot* acknowledge the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ unless God the Father causes his own light to shine in that person's heart "to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

Fearlessly fearing Christians must, therefore, be people who not only have a ready defense, but a respectful defense as well. The Apostle Paul understood this well himself. No one was as bold as Paul in proclaiming Jesus Christ. Yet we see Paul's ability to balance the boldness and readiness of his defense of Christ with respectfulness as well. In the Book of Acts we read about the time when Paul was called up on charges and had to testify before the high priest. However, as he began his defense, the high priest Ananias had those standing by Paul hit him in the face, indeed on the mouth, to silence him. Paul was of course no milk-toast apostle and responded in kind: "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!" (Acts 23:3). Yet those watching quickly rebuked Paul: "Would you revile God's high priest?" (23:4); to which Paul, with readiness and boldness—yes, but with respectfulness as well—then says apologetically, with gentleness and respect: "I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people'" (23:5).

Readiness and respect—it is a delicate balance, but it is a necessary balance. You cannot fear Christ without being respectful in the way you talk with others about Christ. Perhaps this is the point at which we should all be reminded that when it comes to witnessing for Christ, our ends don't justify our means. We cannot honor Christ if we dishonor other human beings, whether they are Christian or not, by how we share our hope in Christ with them.

¹ Quoted in Mark Dever, *Gospel and Personal Evangelism*, p. 108.

You know one of the best ways to avoid dishonoring others in the way you share the hope of the gospel with them? By learning to listen, ask good questions, and not be afraid to apologize when you are insensitive or come on too strong. Here is some good advice I recently came across: "This week, ask someone this question: 'How are you?' Now here's the tricky part. When the person begins to answer, actually listen. Don't interrupt with your own story. Spend a few minutes being unusually interested in the person, and leave it at that." And if that is too risky, this same person goes on to say, then just do this: "Practice noticing the people God has put around you."²

And perhaps it goes without saying, but I will say it anyway: when sharing the hope that is within you with other people, do not let their bad response, if they have a bad response, cause you to get a bad attitude. But trust instead in the sovereignty of God and his perfect timing and purposes with that person, and with you, and with anyone else with whom you share your faith. Always be ready, but always be respectful as well.

A Righteous Defense

According to this passage, there is another way in which our ready defense is to be qualified. Not only are Christians to have a respectful defense, we are also, thirdly, to have a *righteous defense*. Fearless fear causes us to have a righteous defense because a proper fear of Christ causes us *to live rightly in the world*.

You see, this passage speaks to the importance of having a ready defense but doing so with "a good conscience" (3:16). This is a way of referring to one's sense of personal integrity before God. Here Peter refers to the moral and spiritual platform from which the Christian is to speak to the world about Jesus Christ. And without this platform of personal integrity, our speaking of Jesus is, at best, false advertizing, and, at worst, a sham. Without it, we are little more than religious conmen, trying to close a 'gospel' deal.

I recently spent some time with a person who lacked a good conscience; in fact, he was the consummate religious conman. His name is Elmer Gantry. He is not a real person, but a fictitious character in Sinclair Lewis' novel by that title. The Reverend Elmer Gantry is portrayed as little more than a religious charlatan: a vain and ambitious ladder-climber whose lust for fame and power allows him to exploit others and indulge his own lusts without a shred of guilty conscience.

The novel reaches its crescendo in the closing chapter. Elmer is on the verge of his big promotion to a new church, when his secret sexual indiscretions finally go public. He is horrified that he has been found out; horrified, that is, that this may mean he is professionally discredited. Yet through some clever maneuvering behind the scenes, Elmer Gantry gets himself exonerated of all the charges of impropriety. Nevertheless, the religious conman still has his bad conscience and his dirty secrets.

The novel closes, then, with the final dramatic scene in which the Reverend Gantry has to face his congregation on a Sunday morning for the first time after the news has broken and yet he had been defended.

It had come. He could not put it off. He had to face them.

² Jim Henderson, *a.k.a. "Lost"*, p. 15.

Feebly the Reverend Dr. Gantry wavered through the door to the auditorium and exposed himself to twenty-five hundred question marks.

They rose and cheered – cheered – cheered. Theirs were the shining faces of friends.

Without planning it, Elmer knelt on the platform, holding his hands out to them, sobbing, and with him they all knelt and sobbed and prayed, while outside the locked glass door of the church, seeing the mob kneel within, hundreds knelt on the steps of the church, on the sidewalk, all down the block.

“Oh, my friends!” cried Elmer, “do you believe in my innocence, in the fiendishness of my accusers? Reassure me with a hallelujah!”

The church thundered with the triumphant hallelujah, and in a sacred silence Elmer prayed:

“O Lord, thou hast stooped from thy mighty throne and rescued thy servant from the assault of the mercenaries of Satan! Mostly we thank thee because thus we can go on doing thy work, and thine alone! Not less but more zealously shall we seek utter purity and the prayer-life, and rejoice in freedom from all temptations!”

He turned to include the choir, and for the first time he saw that there was a new singer, a girl with charming ankles and lively eyes, with whom he would certainly have to become well acquainted. But the thought was so swift that it did not interrupt the paean of his prayer:

“Let me count this day, Lord, as the beginning of a new and more vigorous life, as the beginning of a crusade for complete morality and the domination of the Christian church through all the land. Dear Lord, thy work is but begun! We shall yet make these United States a moral nation!”

Elmer Gantry, the consummate religious conman. A telling portrait of what it would mean to speak of Christ not with a good conscience, but with a defiled one, and not from a platform of moral integrity, but duplicity. Yet, as I discovered in reading this story, there is an Elmer Gantry in all of us—in me.

Which is why this passage insists that we must “in our hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy” (3:15). We must have a proper fear of Christ because this kind of fear will cause us to live rightly in the world. It will cause you, as Paul says was his ambition, always “to have a clear conscience toward both God and man” (24:16). To keep short accounts, to live with integrity, to strive for consistency between what you profess and how you live, this will be your desire if you fear Christ. A proper fear of Christ will burden you to never let the name of Christ reviled because of how you bear his name before others. And, even though you may be reviled, as this text says, for “your good behavior in Christ” (3:16), you will recognize that it is better to suffer a little now for the sake of a good conscience and for the sake Christ, than to suffer a lot later

for having forsaken a good conscience or Christ. “For,” as Peter says, “it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil” (3:17).

You and I as Christians must realize, then, that the consistency of our life lends credibility to our witness. What we say must match who we are. This does not mean that we must anxiously strive for perfection so that we can claim the moral high ground in preaching to sinners. No, instead, this means we must live consistent lives of repentance and confession of sin, for we are always falling short of God’s will for our lives. And it means that when we speak of our hope in Christ, we are always focusing on the hope we have in the forgiveness of our sins that Jesus has accomplished on the cross; that the Son of Man came not to seek and to save the healthy, but the sick; and that through his Son Jesus Christ, God justifies the ungodly, not the godly. In other words, the gospel must be central in our own lives as we seek to share the centrality of the gospel with others.

Conclusion

The world around is rapidly changing: it is becoming an increasingly hostile environment for the church; it is becoming increasingly difficult for Christians to speak plainly about their faith in Christ. We see it in the classroom; we see it in the courtroom. The church needs to arm itself, therefore, with *fearless fear* in order to speak up for Christ: to be ready to speak, to be respectful when we speak, and to be righteous, that is, gospel-centered, in our speaking about Christ.

Fearless fear is exactly what Jesus said his followers would need if they were to truly follow him, even to the very end. For, as he said, he sends them out into the world “as sheep in the midst of wolves” (Matt. 10:16). His followers, you and me, will therefore inevitably face challenges and misunderstandings and criticisms; some of us may even face physical persecution, perhaps death (10:17-22). Many believers all around the world right now are facing precisely these things (cf. 1 Peter. 5:9). Jesus himself experienced this kind of hostility because of who he was and what he said and did; so too shall his followers, if we are true to who he was and what he said and did (Matt. 10:24-25).

But, let us always remember that Jesus is “the one who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him” (3:22). This Jesus is the one who says to his followers, “...do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matt. 10:28). Rather, Jesus says, in your hearts regard me as holy: fear me, honor me, trust in me, hope in me, and acknowledge me before others, and I will acknowledge you my Father who is in heaven (Matt. 10:32).

Amen.