

May 28, 2023
 Faith in Exile: Living for God
 1 Peter 4:1-11
 Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction: Theme – Faith in Exile

Last week we looked at some of the attitudes we should have in times of suffering, specifically, on those occasions when we suffer for doing good. We looked at the possibility that some of our hardships, which we might consider times of suffering, might actually be times of testing allowed by God to produce endurance in our faith. When we speak of suffering here, we're not talking about an illness or physical pain, but the suffering that comes from the world around us for doing the right thing and not toeing the line of the pervading culture. Peter wrote that this suffering in the life of the believer who is doing the right thing for Christ is not only a possibility, it is inevitable. This morning we're going to continue to look at Peter's letter to these exiled believers as he continues to speak about our attitudes in times of suffering for following Christ. If you are able, please stand with me as I read the Word of God found in 1 Peter 4:1-11. [Read]

So far in this letter, Peter has tried to encourage his readers who have suffered for making a stand for Christ. The attitudes, which Peter talked about in the second half of ch. 3, that we looked at last week, dealt primarily with those which helped the believer prepare for times of suffering. It seems that in the first half of ch. 4, Peter is talking about the attitudes the believer should have in the midst of suffering. So let's take a look.

“Since therefore Christ has suffered in the flesh...” (v. 1a) The word “therefore” connects what Peter is saying with v. 18 of ch. 3. Let's look at the two verses together (3:18, 4:1). Peter is about to explain the main lesson he wants his readers to learn. That Christ suffered for us. “Suffered in the flesh” can literally be translated “suffered death.” Since Christ suffered for us, just as He suffered for those persecuted Christians to whom Peter wrote this letter, there are certain things we should do and certain attitudes we should have when we are faced with suffering for making a stand for Christ.

The wording of this first phrase tells us that Peter chose words that would cause his readers to be moved to action. For he continues, “arm yourselves also with the same way of thinking...” (v. 1b) The first course of action Peter commands the reader to take is to arm himself. The verb used here for “arm” is used nowhere else in the New Testament and it means “make ready or equip.” Peter called the readers to equip themselves, with what? “With the same way of thinking as Jesus.” Peter is calling his readers, and us, to have the same attitude as Christ when He suffered death on the cross. They were to have the same attitude as Christ in thought, principle, and resolve. Just as Jesus was “willing to suffer for righteousness in doing God's will,” so too should we have that same attitude. “Not my will, oh Lord, but thy will be done.”

Why? “...for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.” (v. 1c) This phrase simply means that Christ has broken the chains of sin for the believer who has suffered for righteousness sake. It's not that this person has stopped sinning altogether. It means that the person who has suffered for Christ has demonstrated that sin no longer reigns in his heart, “so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions, but the will of God.” (V. 2)

The result is that the believer will spend the rest of their life pursuing God's will and not their own. The Christians Peter wrote to were now aware of two standards of living. The

standard which they formerly lived by – human passions, and the standard they were to live by from now on—doing the will of God. Because of their faith in Christ, as long as they lived, they were to seek the will of God and not their own sinful passions that controlled their lives before Christ.

Now, in vs. 3-6, Peter explains to us what our motivation should be for enduring times of persecution or suffering for Christ's sake. "For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do." (v. 3a) Peter is telling his readers that they had spent enough time in the past doing what unbelievers do. Is it true that when we come to Christ, all of our habitual sins from the past may not be instantly done away with? Although God could certainly do that if He chose to, sanctification is a process in which over time we become more like Christ. Is it true that it may take time to rid ourselves of some of our old habits? Yes. But should our attitude be that we just accept this as a normal course of life? No!

Why is it so hard for us to accept the fact that the chains of sin were broken by Christ? Remember the words of Christ on the cross. "It is finished." One of my favorite verses of scripture, 2 Cor. 5:17, tells us that our old, sinful way of life is a thing of the past. Our old ways of life died when we committed our lives to Christ. There's no reason to hold on to it. There's no reason to believe that our Lord and Savior's finished work on the cross was insufficient to completely overcome the darkness of our hearts.

Again, Peter is telling his readers that their time in their former ways of life was sufficient. The word "suffices," as it is used here, means "more than enough." Peter uses an understatement to add emphasis to his point. The time believers spent living in sin, prior to coming to Christ, was more than enough—too, and much in fact. Peter's words should serve as a warning to each of us. If you are here this morning and you insist on holding on to your sin, whatever it may be, you need to know that you've had more than enough time—too much in fact. Don't let your attitude be one of complacency where we give in to sin as something we are just going to have to deal with for a little while longer. Have a attitude that says, "Now that I'm in Christ, I don't have to hold on to that sin anymore. Because of Christ, I am a new creature and the old life is a thing of the past. The old me is dead."

Next, Peter provides a list of six different sins that were prevalent in society and were issues in the lives of his readers before they came to Christ. Instead of looking at each of these as specific sins, and thinking they don't apply to us, we should look at them as categories that defined the world that these Christians once lived in, but now are trying to abstain from. "With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you." (v. 4). Here, Peter is describing those that knew these Christians in their former lives as being "surprised" by their new faith and not participating in their former activities. They were not surprised in the sense of, "We think it's great," but the unbelievers were aggravated because these Christians were no longer going along with their sinful behavior. And the reaction to the believers' new faith was severe. Their character was attacked openly and publicly. Unbelievers were so upset about the Christians faith that they went out of their way to destroy the reputations of those who professed faith in Christ. It was not that the believers were going around town and telling all of their unbelieving friends that what they were doing was wrong. The simple fact that the believers would no longer participate in the blatantly sinful and immoral behavior caused people to revile them. They looked upon their change in character as condemnation of the lifestyle they once lived. Can the church be judgmental in the wrong ways. Yes. But much of what the world claims as the church being judgmental is really just a feeling of condemnation because we as Christians won't go along with the current trends in society.

Peter states the truth in vs. 5, “but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.” Peter wanted his readers to have an attitude of confidence and assurance, even though almost everyone in the world that they knew was turning on them with a vengeance. Although life may be very difficult now, there will come a day when everyone who maligned them because of their faith would have to stand before God as judge. And we’re told “God is ready to judge the living and the dead.” We are not to worry about them and what they do to us. They will have to give an account for their actions, for denying the faith and persecuting believers who refused to live as they did. This is not to say that our attitude toward unbelievers should be, “Just you wait. You’ll get yours.” Our attitude should be that no matter what the world throws at us, in the eternal scheme of things it just doesn’t matter. Even if it seems that people get away with attacking you because of your faith, they cannot escape the reality that every person who rejects the gospel and persecutes the children of God will one day have to answer to God for their actions. Keeping this in mind should give us an attitude of pity for our enemies, not one of vengeance.

Peter continues, “For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead.” (v. 6a) What I think Peter is referring to here is those who are “dead spiritually” which connects back to those who have persecuted them. This was Paul’s point in Eph. 2 when he wrote to the Ephesian Christians, “you were dead in in your trespasses and sins in which you once walked, but God, even when you were dead, made you alive together with Christ.” And so Peter continues in vs. 6, “though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God (v. 6b). Praise God, that he can take that which was dead and make it alive again. Because we are alive in Christ, and our life in him will now last forever, even after physical death, what do we have to fear from suffering for Christ’s sake? Even if our very lives are taken, we will still spend eternity with God when Jesus comes again where there will no longer be suffering of any kind. So let us be encouraged to stand in the face of persecution, in whatever form it takes.

In vs. 7-11, Peter wants us to see how important our fellowship with one another is for getting through times of suffering and persecution.

Peter opens this paragraph with a very sober reminder. “The end of all things is at hand.” (4:7a) The early church was well aware that widespread persecution of the church would occur before the end and the return of Christ. “Therefore,” Peter told them, “be self-controlled and sober minded for the sake of your prayers.” (v. 7b) Just in Peter’s wording, we can see that he is calling his readers to look forward. They were not to focus on their persecution and suffering, but the future coming of the Lord. Even though they had no idea, as we have no idea, when exactly the Lord would return, His return is nonetheless immanent. Peter gives two commands here; to be self-controlled and sober minded. The two verbs in the Greek mean almost the same thing. The idea, which they share, is one of mental alertness. To be self-controlled is the same as having a sober mind.

When we are faced with hardship, it’s not always easy to maintain self-control. It’s not always easy to keep our attitude in check and maintain a cool head. Sometimes we just feel like fighting back or getting even. Although it’s true that people will persecute Christians because they hate what Christians stand for; I believe it is also true that people persecute Christians because they hate themselves. Seeing Christ in the life of a person can cause an unbeliever to see the emptiness in his or her own life without Christ. Because of man’s depravity, their first inclination in such a situation is to attack that which caused them to see their own fallibility instead of submitting to the Lordship of Christ. We need to realize this and be self-controlled

and sober minded and not repay evil with evil. Remembering how out of control their lives were before Christ saved them undoubtedly served as a wake-up call for them to keep their eyes fixed on Christ. We should do the same thing. If we are in Christ, we should have an attitude that does not allow our past to dictate our response to present suffering. Our attitude should be that which allows the negative events in our past to remind us to look to the future where all suffering will be a thing of the past.

Peter moves from talking about our individual responsibility to the attitudes that should describe the body of Christ as a whole. Look at vs. 8-9. Like numerous other places in scripture, Peter places love above everything else. His point is love is more than a kind of behavior. It is more than a feeling. It's an attitude. He's talking about the quality of love believers should have for one another. Our love for one another should be a love that, as he describes, is "earnest." The Greek word translated as "earnest" literally means "to stretch out with intense strain or to exert to the limit of [one's] strength." This should be our goal. I think there are times when our attitude about loving others convinces us that some people are just unlovable. We should consider that it may not be that the other person is unlovable, but that we are not exerting ourselves to love them the way we should. If we are earnest in loving each other, then we will not be so apt to focus on the shortcomings of our brothers and sisters.

This doesn't mean that we will overlook sinful behavior and not hold each other accountable. It means that the negative things we do to one another will not affect the extent to which we love each other. We will love each other so much that when a brother or sister in Christ sins against us our first response will not be to expose the sin to the rest of the world. Instead, our first inclination will be to come alongside our brother and lead them to repentance and reconciliation.

We can show each other that kind of love by being hospitable to each other without grumbling. The word "hospitality" describes a person who has an affectionate concern for others. That concern is best expressed through the giving of food and shelter. In the Greek, this word is in the plural form. This means that Peter was calling his readers to practice hospitality repeatedly and regularly. Being hospitable can sometimes be time consuming, tiresome, and frustrating. Every one of us leads busy lives. He's talking about it as a normal course of action by every believer involved in the body of Christ. Practicing hospitality toward each other, with an attitude of cheerfulness, is one way to go from playing church to being the church.

In the last two verses of our passage, Peter moves from speaking about love to service. In vs. 10 Peter tells us, as do other passages of Scripture, that the Holy Spirit has given every believer spiritual gifts. If you are a Christian, you have been given a spiritual gift. Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians shows us that the body of Christ doesn't have any useless members, we are all members on the same body, the body of Christ. And every one of us is commanded to use our gifts to serve the rest of the body.

Peter's point in this passage is for us, as believers, to live our lives for God while in exile by being self-controlled and sober-minded. By loving your brothers and sisters in Christ earnestly and to the extent of your ability and then go a little farther. Open your home, your heart, and your hands to anyone and everyone you can with an authentic attitude of joy.

Let's finish up with v. 11. And we're going to focus on one particular phrase within the verse, "so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ." Here Peter sums up the goal of Christian living. Peter divides the gifts into two broad categories—speaking and serving. If we speak the Word of God to a lost and dying world by sharing the hope that is in us with anyone who doesn't know Christ, the purpose should be to glorify God through Jesus Christ.

Peter, I'm sure not by coincidence, chooses his words in such a way that all other forms of ministry fall under the category of serving. Peter is not limiting the exhortation to ministry leaders. He is speaking to all believers. Everything we do, whether in the church or in the world, should be motivated by genuine Christian love, to glorify God through Jesus Christ.

In this verse, Peter gives us the most important attitude, whether in times of suffering or times of peace. Everything we do should be done to the glory of God, always remembering that it is only possible to glorify Him through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ the Lord must be the center of everything we do, the very center of who we are. Unless Christ is living in us, unless His Spirit is dwelling in our heart, there is forever an impassable divide between us and the Father. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." If we are in Christ, if we have been saved by His finished work on the cross, then we should not simply hope for the right attitudes in times of suffering. Since He has made us alive in Him, we can live victoriously for God by having the same attitude as Christ, no matter what the circumstances, and glorifying Him in all we say and do. But this requires faith, faith in exile.