

Living “Questionably” and Answering Hopefully

1 Peter 3:13-17

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My title today gives away the whole sermon. *Living “Questionably” and Answering Hopefully*. Do that. Amen. Let’s go home. The challenge is, *what does that mean and how do I do that?* We are spending two weeks in this passage and I hope the result is more of us living questionably and answering hopefully.

It’s simply a summary of 1 Peter 3:15. This verse is cited in nearly any book or sermon on evangelism. It’s a key passage on fearless evangelism from the most ironic person of the whole New Testament—Peter. We will get into that. So let’s read our text today.

“Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but 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, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.” (1 Peter 3:13–17 ESV)

If this language sounds familiar, it means you have been dialed in during our 1 Peter series. We’ve heard this before. In 3:1ff. Peter exhorts wives of unbelieving husbands to win their husbands to the gospel with silent but powerful testimony of their respectful and pure lives. In 2:11 he urged conduct among the unbelieving world that would silence their slander against them. In 2:18 he told slaves that when they do good and suffer for it, this is an honorable thing in God’s eyes. Why should Christian wives, slaves and citizens do good and endure suffering? *“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.” (1 Peter 2:21)* Jesus is held out before Peter’s audience as both a model and an inspiration of faithful witness in a hostile environment.

The Powerful Gospel Witness of...Love for Others

Peter continues to weave these threads in 3:13ff. In fact, these verses could be considered the center of the whole letter with everything else being implications and application of it.

But Peter says something different here, something very profound and life-changing. Since some of this passage is repetition, I am going to focus on what is unique because it gets at what I think it is safe to say, is the major obstacle to most Christians engaging in gospel witness—fear.

Fearful witness. Do you know the feeling, Christian? You are at work talking easily about the White Sox or sports with someone. Conversation is flowing smoothly and effortlessly. It transitions to work-related matters, everything about the conversation is completely natural. Then he or she tells you about the sad state of his marriage, mentions their child with the serious illness, the sister who is an alcoholic, or some other thing very personal and close to their heart. What has happened? Now it’s a serious conversation, a soulish-type

conversation. They are searching for answers. They're looking for something to make sense of it. They are looking for hope!

What too often happens inside us Christians? There is this frog that leaps from somewhere inside and takes up residence in our throats. We cough, we stumble, we mumble, and the bare minimum response with this frog is something like, "I'm sorry...oh, well... I'll be praying about that...Oh look at the time!"

What has seized us in that moment? Stupidity has seized us. It's also known as fear. Fear of what? This passage identifies the problem and the solution. "*Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.*" (1 Peter 3:13-14) Peter repeats his previous admonitions about the silent yet powerful witness of love for others that shows itself in a lifestyle of obvious compassion for others. We will see more of this in verse 16. These kinds of ministries make it hard for unbelievers to speak evil of us. *Those Christians are so evil, with all their feeding of the poor and caring for orphans!* Who says that? Nobody.

A look at the first three centuries of the church shows the power of this. These were the centuries before Constantine, the emperor of Rome, converted to Christianity and made it legal throughout the empire. These were days of terrible persecution and hostility toward Christians. Yet history tells us how the early Christians went about their business and lives.

Aristides, a Christian apologist in first-century Athens, described Christians to the Roman Emperor Hadrian this way: "They love one another. They never fail to help widows. They save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they had something they give freely to the man who has nothing. If they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother." (Aristides, as quoted by Christopher Green, *The Message of the Church*, p. 58)

What happened inside Emperor Hadrian, no friend of Christianity, when he heard about the lifestyles of Christians? It made him wonder. It made him curious. It says something to his conscience. If there is theology behind Peter's admonition, it is the *imago Dei*. The image of God. Genesis 1 tells us that when God made humans, he placed an aspect of his character deep inside us. This is so woven into our being that the fall into sin did not remove it. This is the image of God and the moral consciousness of God called conscience. Sin has dulled it but it remains in each of us. The late, great John Stott once wrote, "In all evangelism I find it a constant encouragement to say to myself, "The other person's conscience is on my side." (John Stott, as quoted by Timothy Dudley-Smith, *John Stott, a Global Ministry: a Biography - The Later Years*, p. 402.)

This is Peter's mantra throughout the letter: how should the church live in a hostile environment? With morally and spiritually beautiful lives that appeal to that spiritual dimension inside everyone. (See diagram on top of next page)

The conscience speaks a spiritual language to the soul. Since the essence of God is love, when image bearers perceive self-sacrificing love, it generates wonder. The unbelieving husband toward his Christian wife. The unbelieving employer toward his Christian employee. The whatever unbeliever toward whatever Christian whose lifestyle shows Christian love.



"Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but 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." (1 Peter 3:14-15) Peter urges Christians to live boldly and without fear. Any irony there? Of course. Peter is the quintessential coward in the story of Jesus. This after bragging that he would follow Jesus to the end. Jesus said, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." (Mt. 26:34) That's exactly what happened. Who did he deny Jesus to? A Roman legion? No. A young girl who asked if he was Jesus' friend.

Rather than laugh at Peter, I think Peter's story gives us some hope. After his personal salvation, after Pentecost, Peter is brought before the Sanhedrin and threatened. Old Peter would have run. New Peter says defiantly, "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29) Where did this holy boldness come from?

Who of us hasn't given in to fear and failed to share our faith or even acknowledge we are Christians? I have had times where the gospel door has swung wide open and I stumbled and dithered until the door closed. We are more like Peter and the girl than Peter and the Sanhedrin. So here is a guy who knows something about overcoming fear. What's the key? Look at verse 15 again, "but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy."

Notice he doesn't say, *read books and learn how to answer every question*. He doesn't say, *get your PhD in theology and then maybe you can do something*. Faithful Christian witness doesn't begin in the head but rather in the heart. It begins with the probing question, in my heart, who is Lord? Or, whose opinion of me matters the most?

Let's just be honest, we are fearful in identifying with Jesus because we care too much about what people think. *The frog ribbits in our throats because fear of man resides in our hearts*. What will they think of me? Will they look down on me?

Fear of man is overcome by consciously treasuring Jesus as Lord. We must hold him in our hearts as Scripture describes him to be—high and exalted on his throne. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is the object of the worship of innumerable angels. Glory light radiates his infinite worth. When Jesus in my heart is honored first and highest and most worthy, when his opinion and judgment is my highest concern, what does that do to my concern over the opinion of the 10th grade boy on the bus? The opinion of my neighbor? Coworker? Family member? As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Those who are still afraid of men

have no fear of God, and those who have fear of God have ceased to be afraid of men.”
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 218)

Can I ask you, *who is the real Lord of your heart?*

I get this. I am guilty of this and I have this huge in that most of you don't. What is one of the first questions people ask? *What do you do for a living?* I am a pastor. Right away they expect a certain spiritual conversation and I have had many airplane conversations with people about their life issues when they find out what I do. In spite of that, I still struggle.

So Peter lays out a simple lifestyle approach:

- **Live a lifestyle of love and others-orientation**
- **Hold Jesus in higher honor than what others think of you**
- **Keep your gospel bags packed**

“Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” (1 Peter 3:15)

Keep your gospel bags packed? What does that mean? Jennifer and I are expecting anytime the birth of our second daughter. Kiralee came a little early and many people have their second sooner. So about a week ago we got all our things together. Toiletries. Clothes. Snacks. It's all in there. Why? We never know when this little girl will want to make her appearance. Whenever it is, our bags are packed. We can go on a moment's notice. We are ready.

Have you noticed how opportunities to share about Jesus in your life generally come unexpectedly? We generally don't know they are coming. That's why Peter says that we should always be ready. Ready to do what? *“To make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”*

If you read this to say, *be ready with all your arguments to confront anyone with the gospel*, you are misreading it. Look carefully, how does this conversation start? *Anyone who asks you for a reason*. Do you see what Peter is assuming? Our lives will create questions in the heart of the unbeliever. Peter is assuming a certain level of relationship where the unbeliever observes the way we live. This appeals to the *imago dei* in him and it prompts him to ask, *what's up with you?* This isn't to say there's not a place for Mars Hill type preaching. But the vast majority of us aren't going to do that or be good at that.

What Christian can't love someone? Serve someone selflessly? Live the kind of normal Christian life that creates questions, wonderings, and holy curiosity.

Too often we give our answers when they aren't asking questions and they aren't asking questions because our lives aren't creating them.

“For Pascal presenting someone with a list of proofs for Christianity or evidence for faith is probably a waste of time. If someone basically doesn't want to believe, no amount of proof (or proof texts) can ever convince her. And even if she were convinced, then it wouldn't be the Christian God she had come to believe in, but only what Pascal called “the God of the philosophers.” The crucial factor in persuading someone to believe, then, is not to present evidence, but first to awaken a desire for God in them. In other words, when commending Christianity to people, “make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is.” Such

arguments as there are for Christianity can convince those who hope it is true, but will never convince those who don't." (Graham Tomlin, *Total Church*, p. 179.)

Peter says that there is one aspect of a Christian lifestyle that the unbeliever will be most curious about. *Hope*. "Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the **hope** that is in you." (1 Peter 3:15, emphasis added) What is hope? *Confidence about the future that provides calm and assurance today*. When is that most on display? When we are in a trial. When we are suffering. When our future is uncertain.

We can't help but be optimistic about the future. Eternal life with Jesus is going to be great. The comforting work of the Holy Spirit in our trials is real. The world doesn't have that and experiences devastation in their lives just like we do. As they see how we respond with hope, it pricks something in their ancient DNA. There is an echo of a truth in their conscience. Something about life lived in relationship with their Creator. A time when man's entire being rested joyfully in God's promise of provision.

I hear this often. I'll ask folks, "*How did you come to faith?*" Often it is a story like, there was this guy at work, or this girl in my college dorm, there was something different about her. And they share a story of intrigue that the Christian's life produced. That's what Peter is getting at. When our life elicits a question, our gospel bags are packed and ready to share what? *The reason of the hope within us*.

Peter isn't asking if we have answers but whether our lives are creating any questions. This assumes that we are in the community, in our neighborhoods, in proximity to unbelievers where such questions could even be asked. It assumes relationship within which observations can be made and questions can be asked.

"The world today, as we are all well aware, is not very ready to listen to us or to preaching. It tells us it has no interest in theology and dogma, and there may be some truth in that; the world has become psychological, not to say cynical, and it is not prepared to listen to what people say. But when it sees a life which is triumphant, a personality that is clearly victorious, then it begins to pay attention. The first Christians conquered the ancient world just by being Christians. It was their love for one another and their type of life that made such an impact upon that pagan world, and there is no question but that this is the greatest need of the hour—the Christian quality of life being demonstrated among men and women. That is something to which we are all called and something which we can all do." (Clifford Pond, *The Beauty of Jesus*, p. 129)

That really is the encouragement here. If I said, *to obey God's Word today you must memorize this chart of questions and answers*, we would all be discouraged. But what if Peter is really saying, live lives of love for others and then when they ask you, *what gives?* Tell them your story of meeting Jesus and the wonderful difference he's made in your life. Who can't do that? It's just the story you're living. Tell the story.

It's not books and philosophical answers Peter is calling us to, it's generous lives lived for others with the hope that naturally shows itself when Jesus is on the throne of your heart.

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