

Suffering for Doing Good (1 Pet 3.13-18)

WestminsterReformedChurch.org

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June 17, 2012

Now 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,¹⁵ 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,¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.¹⁸ For 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,¹⁹ in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison,²⁰ because 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.²¹ Baptism, 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,²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. (1 Peter 3:13-22 ESV)

Introduction

We are continuing our study of baptism and related issues such as church membership and communion. We come now to the main text that defines baptism as a pledge; that text is 1 Peter 3.21. This is an interesting passage because it mentions preaching to spirits in prison, it compares baptism with Noah's flood, it states that baptism saves, and it connects baptism to suffering for righteousness. It will take two messages to cover the text in its fullness. Today, our broad topic is the context of the saving pledge of baptism, *which is suffering for doing good*. Next week, our topic will be *the saving pledge of baptism in its context*.

There are four things to discuss regarding suffering for doing good: the foundation for suffering, duties in suffering, perspective on suffering, and *the* example of suffering.

I. The foundation for suffering while doing good (13-14a)

Pointedly, the foundation is the bedrock fact that suffering is not harmful. That has a peculiar ring to it, but it is the foundational truth: **Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?** (3.13). Peter's reasoning is tight with a question within a conditional. The question is **who is there to harm you?** Of course, the answer is *no one*; not a single opponent of the good and righteous, no matter how cruel and powerful, can harm you in the slightest way. The condition for this "invincibility" is being zealous for what is good. If that is case in how you live, then you cannot be harmed. Also peculiar is the complementary fact that you may suffer for doing good and practicing righteousness, but that suffering brings only blessing: **But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed** (3.14a). The Lord leads you, His people, down the paths of righteousness for His name's sake and along the way He prepares a table for you in the presence of your enemies anointing your head with oil and causing your cup to overflow, so you can say, **Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever** (Ps 23.6). We have a foundation in the presence of our enemies, namely, their evil actions toward us are not harmful, only beneficial. After all, they can only kill the body; Peter's words have their roots in the teaching of Jesus (Lk 12.4-5).

II. Duties in suffering for doing good (14b-16)

In one sentence, the duties are to sanctify Christ in your hearts, and from that inner depth to do good courageously to those who afflict you. In other words, if you suffer for doing good, then do even more good. The text is loaded but we can comment on three duties.

A. First, sanctify Christ in your hearts

Remarkably, the first duty in suffering at the hands of evil people is to look in one direction: to Christ with singular devotion. That is the *Pro Rege* principle: it is all for the King! All you do is for Him and all you do is done under His authority. This is the ultimate presupposition of the Christian life that is deep within the heart at the depth of your being. An accent is placed on the Lordship of Christ by the word order. It comes out to this effect: "as Lord, sanctify Christ in your hearts." Sanctify Him (as holy) in your hearts and do so acknowledging His Lordship over you. That is where the Christian life begins according to Paul (believe in your heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is the risen Lord, Rom 10:9-10). Peter spreads this beginning out over the whole of life. The Christian life continues by fixing your eyes on Christ (cf. Heb. 3:1-6; 12:2). It is a matter of heavenly mindedness, which in Colossians means setting your hearts on things above where Christ is seated (Col 3:1) and setting your minds on things above not on earthly things (3:2). In other words, devote yourself to Him!

B. The second duty is courageously answer your opponents

Instead of repaying evil with evil or insult with insult (3.9) and instead of letting fear reign in your hearts, Peter says, "In your hearts sanctify Christ as your Lord so that you will be able to answer them courageously: **Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,**¹⁵ **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** (3.14b-15).

Part of the response to greater difficulty is deeper resolve. When the going gets tough, the Christian gets tougher, not meaner but stronger, and more resolute to do his work. Always prepared means always preparing. It means that you need to be mentally tough for the King and relentless in pursuit of His honor. This relentlessness will show up in study of Scripture with an upward look: to have God's approval. It will show up in a discipleship-learning that is worth its weight in gold. You will push the envelope and take up matters that are tough that you do not initially desire to tackle. In other words, being an earnest and diligent learner of Scripture is of fundamental importance for answer-giving. You know that this is basic but your need to hear it again. You must always be prepared to prepare. It is like military readiness; always in training because answer giving is a process that includes dialogue, retreat, and forward advance.

Therefore, the second duty is inseparable from being a disciple. Growing in your grasp of things, issue by issue, pleases the Lord, satisfies the heart, and leads to the blessing of evil people. Learning is not individualistic but includes the church. As you hone answers in mutual interaction, you all grow together into the image of Christ. Listen to the goal of Paul's prayer for the Ephesians (1:17-18: **that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him,**¹⁸ **having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints**). This is very personal. By the Spirit you may know God better and with deeper hope. This applies behind the scenes, away from the battlefield, in the quiet of your thoughts, and deep in your hearts.

By God's grace, we grow in hope like a sponge soaking up so much water until it can hold no more and it drips out all over the place. This dripping out all over the place is what the unbeliever addresses when he inquires about the hope that is in you. Perhaps it is helpful to remind ourselves that answer-giving is a way of living the Christian life. It is a matter of being a Christian to review arguments thoughtfully. Thus to wait for questions is not the same as folding the hands in idleness. We are active while we wait. We are active in prayer for God's open door. We are active finding answers that cause us to know our Lord better in a personal and enriching way. We are active finding answers that grow our hope by "leaps and bounds" (in our grasp of

the riches of His glorious inheritance). This way of finding, living, and giving answers manifests devotion to Christ.

C. The third duty is practice good behavior (do good to your opponents from the heart)

We must remember that when an unbeliever is cornered, he always has a way out, he can simply lie. That recourse is not open to the Christian. Answer-giving under the Lordship of Christ will be done in a godly manner. Peter cites three things that come together in the notion of good conduct or good behavior: gentleness, respect, and a clear conscience (3.15b-16: **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**).

I think it is safe to assume that respect in this context refers to the showing of respect to man (which is ultimately to God). As we are to be gentle to others, likewise, we are to be respectful to them. These qualities are needed when you become truly informed by pursuing answers with due diligence. Then with some serious and seasoned knowledge it is likely that *you will be questioned by people who are as adamant as they are uninformed* and you will be able to see that fact clearly. However, what is transparent to you is opaque to them! Thus you will be tempted to pounce on them, to be harsh, to be impatient, and to get the intellectual club or the emotional whip and hit them where it hurts. People often respond to challenge by saying, "I just don't agree" or "that is just your opinion," as if these empty words somehow confirm something with no basis or support. At this juncture, I would like to have a two by four to hit them right square in the forehead, but I know the gentle way is the right way. No matter how deep our convictions may be (and with good support), no matter how cherished, when they are opposed, even by ignorance, we are to respond in a godly way with gentleness, respect and overall good behavior.

Of course, a godly manner is a challenge because it is both a duty in the face of suffering and a duty that may lead to more suffering. Scripture informs us that all men are sinners and seek in all that they do to suppress the basic truth of their responsibility to God. They always have an "axe to grind." To say this is not to charge men with a lack of surface honesties and sincerities of civilized life. It is only to be concerned with the deepest controlling motives of men about which Scripture informs us. We must never forget this fundamental fact about unbelievers. We must remember that the natural man is not genuinely seeking the truth. We can accept and go with the reality of a surface sincerity, but Scripture tells us the truth of what is in the depths of the heart. Hence the weighty challenge is that a gentle, respectful, and upright manner should govern all our efforts to give answers. Then, seeing the real need that is before our eyes in their assaults and insults will move us to gentleness (cf. we show mercy if shown mercy; if we truly know it).

Good behavior has its roots deep in the heart where we set our Lord apart. It is a matter of a good, clear, and clean conscience. That can only be true by seasoning all our conduct with devotion to Jesus Christ in conscious submission to His authority. To you Lord, I surrender all!

Remarkably, godly speech and conduct are ways that we repay evil with blessing. This contrasts with retaliatory speech and threats. Such blessing is rooted in a deep trust in God as final judge (1 Pet 2:23) and it may result in not only restraining evil, but it also may bring salvation: **so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame** (1 Pet 3.16b). In summary, while suffering for doing good, do even more good from the heart with your eyes fixed on Christ.

III. Perspective on suffering for doing good (a third major point, v. 17)

It is a fundamental point that not all suffering is the same: some kinds of suffering are better than other kinds: **For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil** (3.17). That there is a better kind of suffering is surely a striking statement. Peter is not speaking about better and lesser ways to endure suffering. He does not speak to the way we handle suffering but to its cause. Notably, when you suffer, it is God's will for you. It is His decision. The actions of evil people toward you are under God's perfect control. His providence explains the "no possible harm" principle (of v. 13). Evil men treat you badly but God's governs all their actions for your good and His glory. This is the necessary perspective: suffering for righteousness sake according to the will of God is far better than suffering for doing evil.

IV. The example of suffering for doing good (v. 18)

Christ left us an example of how to endure suffering (2:22-25: **He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.** ²³ **When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.** ²⁴ **He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.** ²⁵ **For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls**). We have a leader who compels us in a commanding way: "do as I say *and do*" not simply "do as I say." A good way to think of it is that thoughtful Christ centered godly living and speaking are ways we bless others, as Jesus has blessed us. Instead of threats, insults, deceit, and retaliation towards those who oppose us, we follow our redeemer's example to entrust ourselves to God and do good to those who afflict us.

So, it all finally comes together in the example of Christ that we are to follow: **For 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** (3.18). These are powerful words: Jesus suffered doing good. He suffered doing good unto death. He suffered in death according to the will of God for our good, the righteous one for unrighteous ones to bear the punishment of our sins and thus to bring us safely home to God. There is no better example and no richer model than Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore, we have every encouragement to follow in His steps no matter what suffering befalls us.

Conclusion

1) We have only part of the story

We have to keep asking about the connection of this section with the saving pledge of baptism that emerges in this context. That will be a main thing that we will do next time. For now, we can end our work with the text at verse 19 which puts us in the middle of a sentence (in which...). So we only have part of the story.

2) We have the broad context for the rest of the story

Suffering for doing good in the pursuit of righteousness is the broad context that we need to understand the saving pledge of baptism in verse 21. Regarding this context, there are some very helpful lessons that equip us for living a holy life in a God-opposing world. Three duties are emphasized: devote yourself to Christ, courageously answer your opponents with preparedness, and practice doing good from a clear conscience.

May we fall down before the majesty of Jesus Christ the risen Lord of all and head of the church; may the Holy Spirit enable us to grow in our love for Christ, in giving answers that honor His name by displaying the godly traits of gentleness and respect to all people and especially to those who oppose goodness and righteousness; may we live with clear consciences for the glory of the triune God, amen.