

The Quest for Character

Authenticity

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Good morning friends.

I'd like to start with a sampling of recent social media posts of mine. You see, I am a serial re-poster. I read something that hits home, or is inspiring, and immediately I am convinced that the rest of the world must also read what I have read, so that they will feel equally inspired. So, here we go with some of my recent facebook re-posts:

If you think you've blown God's plan for your life, rest in this. You, my beautiful friend, are not that powerful.

My heart is broken this morning. Gilroy. Dayton. El Paso.

I stand in solidarity with families mourning the loss of the ones that they love. I stand in solidarity with the oppressed, the scared, the scarred.

As a nation, we stand at the crossroads. America who are you?

My friends, hatred and racism have no place in our country. In our lives. Violence gives birth to violence, hatred gives birth to hatred. But love alone can end this cycle.

Do not drink this poison of violence. Hatred and fear are not your mother language. Love is your native tongue. -Jon Foreman

Whatever you are doing today, do it with the confidence of a 4 year old in a batman t-shirt.

I thought I was a good person, but the way I react when a person drives slowly in the left lane would suggest otherwise.

Why am I a serial re-poster. I think, subconsciously, I have some degree of hope that just putting truth (or witty humor) out there, is making a significant positive contribution to my world. It's kind of funny isn't it. Almost no effort, and in a silly, naïve, way, I expect big results. And then I have a God arranged, real life conversation. While at work, I was out riding around with a few co-workers including our 21 year old intern. She began talking about her peers and their addiction to social media. She expressed some disgust with herself with these words. "I just sit there scrolling through my phone for an hour or more, and when I finally look up, I couldn't tell you about a single thing I just read or saw" Out of the mouths of babes, right?

So.... I wonder, Is it possible I'm not changing the world through my serial re-posting. Maybe something more than the sincere expression is required. Maybe God had a design for changing the world long before the advent of the internet and social media, and maybe that design is just as effective today, as it has ever been, if it is less used. I hope by the end of our time together you are convinced it is true.

Today we are going to look at a familiar passage. It is a passage used most frequently in the context of Christian apologetics (academic defense of the precepts of Christianity), but I hope to establish that this common understanding falls woefully short of the real point of this section of scripture.

In its original context, the letter of 1 Peter was written for the purpose of encouragement. It was written by Peter shortly after the burning of Rome. History tells us that Rome burned at the hand of Emperor Nero. Nero, however, blamed Christians. The Roman Christians of the day were already hated because of their association with the Jews and the belief that they were hostile toward Roman culture, which made them perfect scapegoats. The result was one of history's greatest systematic persecutions of Christian believers. This is the setting for the words we will read together:

1 Peter 3: 13-17

13 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.

Probably, if you've heard this passage taught before, the teaching has placed a real emphasis on the "always being prepared to make a defense" phrase. In fact, the Greek root word translated defense, is the same word from which the English word apologetics comes. That's why it is the apologetics passage. Please understand, I do not have a problem with Christian apologists. I am a huge fanboy of people like Ravi Zacharias. What I am saying, is if all we think about as we are studying this passage is Christian apologetics, we have missed the point.

For the purposes of today's message, I want to focus on the **lifestyle** described in the passage, rather than the academics described in the passage.

When I was a younger man, I had a conversation with an older Christian mentor of mine. We were talking about the idea of Lifestyle Evangelism. The approach to evangelism that says we are to live Holy lives in and around folks who are not yet Christians, and make the most of the opportunities that come our way because of the life we live. As we discussed the idea, I got the clear indication that this mentor of mine was not keen on the idea of Lifestyle Evangelism, which kind of baffled me. Did he have a problem with the call to live Holy lives, or did he think that we are not supposed to share the Gospel story as God gives opportunity? He was a pastor, and awesome mentor, so that couldn't be true. As we continued to talk about the subject, my friend eventually admitted that his issue with Lifestyle evangelism is, "that it just doesn't work!" This assertion left me sad, and a little confused.

Today, I think my friend was both right, and wrong. In a lot of cases, lifestyle evangelism doesn't work, but I don't think it's the biblical formula that's broken. I think the problem is a lack of authenticity. It doesn't work because God's kids aren't living like God's kids.

Alright, Let's look back at the passage again. Let's also keep in mind that the context for these words is real threat to life and livelihood stuff, the persecution of the Roman church. As we read, let's look for the responsibilities that are outlined.

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Have no fear of them, nor be troubled: Responsibility 1: Be fearless in the face of persecution

but in your hearts honor Christ: Responsibility 2: Honor Jesus in the face of persecution

being prepared to make a defense: Responsibility 3: Know what you believe in the face of persecution

having a good conscience: Responsibility 4: live cleanly in the face of persecution

Be Fearless in the face of persecution ***Have no fear of them, nor be troubled:***

Fear is a terrible motivator... Fear is a terrible decision maker

Each of the original recipients of this letter were dealing with a very real threat to their lives. They were worried about protecting their families, getting to work, would there still be work, what if they find out that I'm a believer?

The first phrase, Have no fear of them is a quote from Isaiah 8:12-13. The context is the children of Israel living in fear of Assyrian invasion. Throughout the centuries, God's people have felt the wrath of persecution based simply on the fact that they are God's people. In these contexts, God's reminder is to not fear that which can not harm what matters, but fear (respect) me. Keep me before your eyes. I am the I am who preserved the spies, washed out the armies of Pharaoh, busted Paul and Silas out of prison, protected Noah and his crew, and used a shepherd to demonstrate my power to my people and the enemies of my people.

Here is what I want us to see clearly. In both the Isaiah passage and the Peter passage, there is an enemy, aligned against entities that represent nothing less that God's plan for redemption. First God's people Israel, and later, the Roman Church. These are not attacks against individual people or jobs, or any other individual threat that is only a single component of the whole of the persecution. Folks this is the reason the text can say have no fear of them. The thing that you are being persecuted for has exactly 0% chance of failure! Do you see that. God's juggernaut of redemption will not be stopped, so let's stay on board, because it's going to be an awesome ride. There is no reason for fear. If God is for us, who can be against us?

I think one of the most effective strategies of the evil one is attacking the flank. Coming at us from the side, rather than head-on. He doesn't always ask "Did God truly say". Sometimes it's way more effective to convince us that our fight is small and therefore too insignificant for God to be bothered with. If Israel and the Roman church were to each only focus on the individual threat, it is easy to become convinced that "my thing is not big enough for God to be bothered with". But boy, when we see our troubles as a part of God's unstoppable great plan for redemption, our fears shrivel on the vine.

The question arises how does this apply not to Israel, or the Roman Church of Peter's day, but Grace Community Church, Painted Post, NY, 2019? Where does fear, and focus on our individual fights threaten God's plan for redemption today? I want you to honestly ask, and try to answer, that question for yourself. It's worth pondering outside the context of this single mes-

sage, on this solitary Sunday morning. I think there are probably a number of answers, but for now, I offer this: One of the greatest fears that threaten the progress of the gospel today is the fear of man. I care more about what you think of me, than what God thinks of you. By the way, you know what God thinks of you? This is what God thinks of you. He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. You see the small focus there. I make it about me. I might be rejected, I might lose a friend, I might get a reputation as a weirdo at work.... I might I might I might... It's not at all about love. Love says, I want you to see this Jesus of mine for who he is. I want you to know him as the best friend you'll ever make. I want you to be rescued from your destiny apart from him, and Oh yeah, by the way, the God who made you wants the same thing.

No condemnation here friends, just a renewed call to remember Fear is a liar. Let's love people and tell fear of them to be silent.

An authentic walk with Jesus makes love based decisions, not fear based decisions, even in the face of persecution.

Honor Jesus in the face of persecution: ***15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy***

This literally means put Jesus on the throne of your heart. Here is the core principle. Proverbs 4:23 says: Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. So what squatters are there who try to occupy the space designed for Jesus. Who wants to sit on the throne of your heart? We just covered one suspect, fear, but the line is long for those who would compete for this coveted place. How about pride, the big one, the one that encompasses most of the rest of the lot. Pride wants that throne badly, and it is an ever present threat to the throne.

What if pride is on the throne of our hearts when we encounter an opportunity to share the gospel? What is the outcome. Where does that conversation go? I suspect that when pride is the dictator, our sharing is going to be more about making us famous than making Jesus famous. Sharing the Gospel is not to be an academic pursuit that results in us looking smart, in fact the process of sharing the gospel should have the net effect of us shrinking in importance, and Him growing. It points to our insufficiency, and His full sufficiency. If pride sits on the throne, no matter how smart we are, we are going to eventually be seen to be a fraud.

If you are feeling the impact of this truth. If you have realized that there is a poor substitute on the throne of your heart, please don't throw in the towel. You are not alone in this wrestling match for the throne of your heart. Paul covered this battle thoroughly in Romans chapter 7. His words about himself.

Romans 7:18-20

18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Now you are probably thinking, didn't he just say "don't throw in the towel", and then he reads that? I know the words sound like a sad assessment. I get that. But I think we can find encouragement in the truth there. The encouragement is two fold. First, this is Paul. Remember him, the guy that turned the world of his day upside down for Christ. That's the guy who wrote those words about himself. His struggle is our struggle and he was effective in his participation in God's plan for redemption.

...and second

Romans 8:1&2

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.^[a] ²For the law of the Spirit of life has set you^[b] free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

These verses come on the heels of Paul's declaration of what a mess he is. Jesus redeemed you, and all your mess, and set you free to serve him. Remind yourself of that. Dwell on that. Jesus says it's so, and made it so, and so, it is so. Marinate in the fact that your wayward heart has been redeemed. Heart issues are hard issues, but we all have them, and God's plan for redemption plows forward through us regardless. If you are broken, you are in good company!

Leave Jesus on the throne of your heart and watch Him use your life for His purposes. When that is our true goal, the words we chose will be loving, and careful, and sweet to the hearer.

Honor Jesus in the face of persecution and trust Him with the result.

Know what you believe in the face of persecution

, *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*

This phrase really means: Know what you believe and be able to articulate it lovingly. We are asked to give a defense with gentleness and respect. By way of contrast, my thoughts to drift to folks like Westboro Baptist Church who claim to speak for God, and spew arrogant hate filled words, like “thank God for dead soldiers” and “God hates America” and call it defending the faith. I think God, through Peter’s pen was warning us about the danger of knowledge without love, which is depicted to the extreme with folks like that. The goal of folks like that is to be right. Our goal should be speak the truth in love, as we seek, and God gives, opportunity to share truth gently and respectfully.

Can I encourage us to know what we believe, because **we want to know what we believe**, not so we can prove someone wrong. It seems today, the prevalent form of communication all around us is hostile argument. We just expect it. Even ESPN is filled with people arguing. I fear that we, as Christian believers, are being duped into believing that our cultural norm should be our norm. God forbid! I think as believers, we have the responsibility to demonstrate that discourse can still be civil, even loving, even if you disagree.

Let’s let Jesus be right and study him, and give him the credit when we talk to people. Friends, let’s study Jesus, not arguments, and let our knowledge of him speak, and make Him famous. Ridicule and embarrassment will be a part of the process, and that’s OK. Please, let’s commit to knowing what we believe and speaking the truth IN LOVE!

Live cleanly in the presence of persecution: ***having a good conscience***

Here, I think, Peter get’s personal. I picture him writing this section with just the beginning of a tear in the corner of his eye. Peter knew the crushing weight of guilt, and shame in his own story. He remembers his cursing filled denials of Jesus. This section of this passage is very personal for him. He knows the pain of having walked with Jesus, having pledged his loyalty, and

then having run in fear and denied knowing him at all, and sprinkled in the cursing to add the extra measure of proof that he “never knew him”..

We must remember that the Peter then, and the Peter writing these words are completely different people. He has grown and matured, and looks back on the younger Peter with regret, and that’s why he pens this section. Peter is drawing our attention to his deepest and most famous scars, and saying Please, learn from my mistakes, redeem my mistakes by not following me there. How willing are you to let others learn from your scars?

If you are a parent, you have begged and prayed that your kids would be saved the pain of repeated your most painful mistakes. Here Peter is parenting all of us.

Friends, our scars are where the light shines through. If we view them as God views them. God will use our scars. Remember Romans 8:1 no condemnation. God has removed the condemnation from our scars, and what’s left is the lesson. Peter could have chosen to skip this topic. To decide his teaching was complete without bringing to us his most famous failing. So why didn’t he? Love, and God confidence. He loved us, you and me, from a time centuries ago. He knew, we could grow through his mistakes. It is little to forfeit personal comfort if a brother or sister can avoid failure, by hearing about our failures. Our scars are where the light shines through.

You and I have scars that we hide and cover. What are they? Who can benefit from the stories our scars tell? Don’t hear what I am not saying. I am not saying everyone you meet needs to hear about every one of your scars. I think we call that TMI, or oversharing... That kind of sharing might just be motivated by a desire for attention. I am saying, we should not hide our scars when we know they will help someone we love, because we fear judgement. Fear is a terrible decision maker.

Peter is pleading with us through the years: Share your scars, when sharing them will help keep someone else from suffering the same scar. Peter had scars called regret and shame. Let’s help each other live cleanly in the face of persecution by sharing the lessons contained in our scars.

Asking for the **Hope**. Remember this letter is to people under persecution, and Peter says to be ready to answer those who ask about your hope. Have you ever asked yourself “How do I handle stormy seas?” Have you ever thought about what reflections of God are observed by those around you when life presses in.

This church family knows something about walking through really hard things, with hope. As I look around this room, I remember so many of your stories, how so many of them have included incredible heartbreak. I remember the stories, and the hardship contained in the stories. But you know what stands out? How you have walked through your storms with hope. I am grateful for you and your example! So many of you could stand beside me today and speak to this truth better than I!

Here's is what I want to suggest when life sucks: Speak Hope, over and over, through the rough times,

Phillipians 4:8-9

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

That word think, is better translated DWELL. Dwell on these things.

I remember a phrase that Kelly and I repeated over and over when we were walking through the scary times on the rough seas of foster care and then through a turbulent adoption process. There were lot's of stomach churning situations, nights when we were kept awake by thoughts we could have to give these kids up. Throughout that time, we kept repeating the following phrase to ourselves and to our friends "God loves them more than we do, and He will take care of them". I can't tell you to what degree we really owned those words at that time. Of course, academically we believed it. It is a truth that God loves my children more than I do. But that situation forced us to have to own what we believed, and so we kept repeating truth (dwelling on it) until we owned it. British politician Andrew Bennett said something you may have heard before, and I think it encapsulates the point I am trying to make. He said "The longest journey you will ever take is the 18 inches from your head to your heart" Truth is here for us to repeat until we own it.

Now here is another truth. It is normal to look at persecution and be tempted to panic. Everyone experiences the temptation to panic. Even Navy Seals are tempted to panic in a bad situation. The difference lies in what you chose to do with the temptation. The Navy Seal experiences the temptation to panic, but makes a choice to put panic away, and he or she survives. The authentic believer is tempted to be hopeless when the winds and waves crash, but **chooses** to hope in the God who calms the seas, and quiets the winds. It's not as easy as it sounds when I say it. I know that. It's not intended to be easy, but it is profitable and doable. Authen-

tic Christianity chooses hope in the face of panic, and a watching world says, I want some of that. Then they ask about it.

Life provides opportunity to build hope. Hope is built through fearless living. Hope is built as we maintain our hearts focus on Jesus. As we continue to own what we believe, hope grows. As we work to keep our conscience clear, the accuser is defeated, and hope builds.

This passage is about hope. It's not about apologetics, and philosophical debates. It's about hope. It's about hope being present where hope shouldn't exist. It's about the contrast that exists when you are in a hopeless situation, but hope persists. It's about the people around you and I, seeing that hope that exists when it shouldn't logically exist, and going huh, I wonder what's up with that. It's about those same people asking us what that improbable hope is all about, and us pointing them to Jesus our sustainer and the source of our improbable hope. Hope is the secret sauce!

Authentic Christianity is maintenance of Hope when circumstances would logically lead us to lose hope. Authentic Christianity is something God will use to show that hope is possible when it seems impossible. God will use the peculiar hope he places in you, through your circumstances, to change the trajectory of those around you, as they marvel at the hopefulness you display.

Maybe, my social media reposts alone, aren't going to change the world. Maybe something more is required.