

“Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.”

—1 Peter 3:13–17 (NASB)

The Apostle Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 1:18–31 deals a definitive blow against the notion that Christians can obtain the world’s validation while proclaiming a truly Christian worldview (see Lesson 16, “The Word of the Cross,” 3/16/2022). Paul sums it up simply in v. 18, “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” In response to those who nonetheless still try to win the world’s approval, J. Gresham Machen wrote,

There are those who are concerned with the question of their standing before men but never with the question of their standing before God. There are those who are interested in what ‘people say’ but not in the question of what God says. Such men, however, are not those who move the world. They are apt to go with the current. They are apt to do as others do. They are not the heroes who change the destinies of the race. The beginning of true nobility comes when a man ceases to be interested in the judgment of men and becomes interested in the judgment of God. (*What Is Faith?*, 163)

We cannot serve two masters. We must care nothing about the judgments of men, but greatly about the judgment of God. However, a Christian’s disregard for the world’s validation does not imply that he need never answer the world’s questions, accusations, or arguments. True, the unbeliever “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him” (1 Cor 2:14a). It is shameful to manipulate the content of the Christian faith according to what will bring about the most positive response from the unbeliever. Nevertheless, a defense by the Christian must still be mounted. **We must be ready with a proper response.**

To understand the nature of this response we turn to the letter of First Peter. The Apostle Peter addresses this letter to believers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet 1:1)—Roman provinces covering the area of what today is central and northern Turkey. The date of Peter’s writing is difficult to pinpoint, but scholars generally agree it was written around the time of the catastrophic burning of Rome in July AD 64. It was around that time that the position of the Roman government toward Christians was changing. Emperor Nero even used the fire as the pretext to begin harsh persecution of Christians who lived in Rome, even using some of them as “human candles” to illuminate his gardens at night. It is unlikely that such violence against Christians reached all the way to the regions where Peter’s audience lived—some one thousand miles to the east. But they nonetheless were facing some kind of harassment for their faith. Peter refers to it as follows:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. (4:12–13)

A divinely-inspired letter written to believers in such a context provides excellent material to study for developing a proper response to those with questions and accusations. In particular, the Apostle Peter’s instructions in **1 Peter 3:13–17 provides four essential directives for mounting a faithful defense in a hostile culture.**

I. Establish the Fundamental Assumptions (1 Peter 3:13–14a)

Peter writes, **“Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed” (3:13–14a).** Peter’s words provide a response to what he just wrote

in vv. 10–12, wherein he quotes from Psalm 34—a powerful psalm about God’s protection of the godly and His punishment of the unrighteous. Based on this quote, Peter draws out *two fundamental assumptions*.

A. Assumption #1: Diligence in doing good is the first line of defense (v. 13).

Peter’s first assumption is expressed as a rhetorical question: “Who is there to harm you?” It assumes a negative answer: “No one.” The “harm” he refers to is an intentional and personal injustice brought upon a believer because of his faith. Peter contends that in the grand scheme of things, the likelihood of significant, physical maltreatment falling upon all believers in general is limited.

But Peter attaches the limit of such maltreatment to one very important caveat: “if you prove zealous for what is good.” The words “prove zealous” can be translated as “become zealots,” and that which is to be zealously pursued is described as “good.” What is this “good”? Peter helpfully summarized it in the preceding paragraph: **“To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit, not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead” (3:8–9).**

Thus, Peter identifies the first aspect of the Christian’s response to the attacks and interrogations of the unbelieving world. It is not a verbal one but a lifestyle one—a *virtuous life*. The believer must work hard at erecting this defense well before the threat of persecution becomes a reality. If he does, the likelihood of maltreatment by his neighbors will be reduced.

B. Assumption #2: Suffering for doing good is a distinct privilege (v. 14a).

But Peter does not rule out the experience of serious maltreatment completely. His second assumption acknowledges it may come: “But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed.”

The basic meaning of “**blessedness**” in this context is “being especially favored or privileged.” It refers to the status that is attained when God extends His grace upon a person. Here, that special privilege is extended to the believer who suffers for his life of Christ-centered righteousness. Peter speaks of this in even more direct terminology later in his letter when he writes, **“If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed” (1 Pet 4:14)**. Most likely, as he writes these words Peter is remembering Jesus’ teaching in the Beatitudes, where the same word “blessed” is found twice in relation to suffering for righteousness and for Christ in particular (cf. Matt 5:10–12).

Consequently, Peter calls upon his readers to ask themselves, “Which kind of life would you prefer? A life of safety and security, with the world’s approval but devoid of God’s? Or a life of danger, threats, and the potential of persecution, but with the special status of God’s approval?”

II. Obey the Primary Obligations (1 Peter 3:14b–15a)

Peter continues, **“AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts” (3:14b – 15a)**. Peter identifies *two primary obligations* in response to the possibility of persecution raised in v. 14a. His obligations are expressed in an *antithetical exhortation* (“not *this* but *that*”) and based on the text of **Isaiah 8:12–13**, “You are not to say, ‘*It is a conspiracy!*’ in regard to all that this people call a conspiracy, and you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of *it*. It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, and He shall be your dread.”

A. Obligation #1: Refuse to fear your oppressors (v. 14b).

Peter begins with a pair of prohibitions: “AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED.” He adapts the language of Isaiah 8:12 slightly to state, literally, “do not fear the fear of them,” which can be understood as “do not fear the fear they inspire.” **This “fear” refers to a state of apprehension, particularly when one believes that that which he cherishes is under threat.** Peter lays down a clear command: Do not give in to their manipulation. Opponents of the cross of Christ will seek to capitalize on the fear they can inspire by threatening that which they think you cherish. The Christian must refuse to play that game, and he can only do that if fears something much higher—*Christ Himself!*

To press the point further, Peter adds a parallel prohibition also taken from Isaiah 8:12, “and do not be troubled.” This verb, “to be troubled,” has the idea of being through into confusion or experiencing inner turmoil. This is not the response the Christian should experience when faced with the fiery ordeals that may come. Unpreparedness and a lack of transcendent perspective leave the Christian weak and susceptible to the enemies’ methods. Peter warns his readers that this is not God’s plan for the Christian.

B. Obligation #2: *Submit to the lordship of Christ (v. 15a).*

In antithesis to his prohibitions, Peter instructs his readers in the positive: “but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts” (3:15a). This simple command is central to the entire paragraph. It defines in short order what is crucial to a successful defense against the accusations and threats of a hostile world.

But although the phrase appears simple, it is notoriously difficult to translate into English. The original language of the Greek leads to three possible renderings: (1) “sanctify Christ as Lord” (NASB; LSB); (2) “sanctify Christ the Lord” (ESV); or (3) “sanctify the Lord, that is Christ.” While each option has its merits, the best rendering is the third: “sanctify the Lord, that is Christ.” This option best reflects Isaiah’s wording in Isaiah 8:13, which states, “It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy.”

The word “sanctify” here in 1 Peter 3:15 means “to reverence, to regard as holy, to set apart”—the same idea as “regard as holy” in Isaiah 8:13. While in Isaiah the text calls upon readers to regard *Yahweh* (“the LORD”) as holy, here the text calls upon readers to regard *Christ Jesus* as holy. The statement is a remarkable expression of Peter’s understanding of the deity of Jesus Christ.

In addition to that, the statement expresses what is crucial to a proper defense: *submission to the lordship of Christ*. The Christian’s entire life—his “heart” (v. 15a)—must be submitted to Him. A faithful answer to the unbeliever’s questioning is possible only when the believer strives to submit his beliefs, thoughts, desires, will, and affections to the authority of Jesus Christ as He has revealed Himself in His word.

III. Display the Appropriate Responses (1 Peter 3:15b–16)

The Apostle Peter does not call for silence, retaliation, or retreat as the Christian’s response against hostile actors. Instead, Peter calls for an appropriate “defense” (ἀπολογία, *apologia*)—a verbal response or *apology* in the positive sense of the term: “always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame” (3:15b–16). This response is to be made “to everyone”—to king and commoner alike—and about “the hope”—a synonym for “salvation.” He highlights *two aspects of this appropriate response*:

A. Response #1: *Answer in the appropriate attitude (v. 15b).*

Despite the hostility that comes against the Christian, the Christian must always respond with “gentleness” (cf. 2 Tim 2:24–25). The term emphasizes “the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance.” The defense must come from one who does not take himself too seriously. He must remember that the real problem is not that *his own person* has been belittled, but that *the faith and its resulting righteousness* has been maligned. In other words, the Christian in that moment must recognize that the issue is not ultimately about *him*—his own honor or rights. Thus, this quality is a horizontal one—one that describes an appropriate response in terms of a Christian’s interactions with other men.

Second, the Christian must always respond with “reverence.” The term refers to “fear, respect, awe.” The term obviously does not refer to the fear of men, since that response has just been prohibited by Peter in the previous verse (v. 14b). Rather, this quality is a vertical one—one that describes the attitude of the Christian *to God* in the moment of his defense. The Christian must defend the faith not focusing ultimately on his opponent, but on his God. He is the ultimate audience.

B. Response #2: Illustrate with the appropriate conduct (v. 16).

Peter states, “and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.” The appearance of the phrase “**a good conscience**” comes in direct connection to “**good behavior.**” In other words, the good conscience Peter prescribes is the conscience of the one whose life is clear of glaring inconsistencies and hypocrisy. He is a man of *integrity*—one who *walks the talk*. Such a lifestyle lends crucial support to the verbal defense that is made, and in so doing, shames the opponent and leaves him without excuse.

IV. Embrace the Sovereignty of God (1 Peter 3:17)

At the end of his instruction, Peter returns to the ideas with which he began in vv. 13–14. He ends the paragraph with a “better/than” construction intended to evoke contemplation: “**For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong**” (v. 17).

In the grand scheme of things, it is far worse to suffer for unrighteousness than to suffer for righteousness. But Peter here adds an additional note not previously stated in the instruction. If suffering for righteousness does indeed occur, Peter comforts his readers by reminding them that **it is never outside of God’s will**. Suffering for righteousness is never due to blind, impersonal fate. It is never an accident. It is never evidence that God’s enemies have triumphed. God always has a purpose for it. Thus, the believer must “not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you . . . as though some strange thing were happening to you” (4:12). Instead, with full confidence in God’s sovereignty, the believer must respond to such suffering and “rejoice with exultation” (4:13).

How must we respond?

1. **Before the Defense.** *Think ahead.* Develop a biblical perspective on suffering for righteousness’ sake. Be thinking through the Bible’s teaching on persecution even before you ever experience it. *Act now.* Your reputation does precede you. Establish your defense for future hostility now by developing a testimony of charity, integrity, patience, and dignity (apply 1 Peter 3:8–9).
2. **During the Defense.** *Fear the right thing.* A profound fear of God in Christ will deliver you from compromise in the moment of pressure. Thus, whenever the moment of maltreatment begins, quickly get your eyes off your circumstances and focus them on the majesty of God. *Speak carefully.* As you do begin your defense, remember that the manner of your delivery is important. The end—a successful defense—does not justify any and every means, including scorn, hatred, or retaliation. *Live consistently.* A life lived in harmony with your defense will both vindicate you and condemn your opponent.
3. **After the Defense.** *Trust God.* Whatever the result, know that it is exactly God’s plan. Remind yourself constantly that no painful thing you experience is accidental or wasted. God is working it out for the best possible outcome. *Live by principle.* We all know it is better to suffer for righteousness than to do unrighteousness and suffer for it. Live out this reality by faith and in contentment.

For Further Study

1. Memorize 1 Peter 3:14–15
2. How do unbelievers around you (family members, coworkers, neighbors) look on your life? Have you already laid a solid defense through righteous living, that will mitigate against the effects of future persecution?
3. Review the qualities listed in Peter 3:8–9. Identify one practical thing you should change or improve in your lifestyle for each of the seven qualities listed.
4. Why is *fearing God* a virtue? List several biblical texts that prescribe it and define what it means and how it cancels the fear of man.
5. Describe how it looks when a man embraces the doctrine of God’s sovereignty in practice.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: March 30, 7pm, “Not Enticed by Desire”