

SMILE BACK

1 Peter 3:8-18

INTRODUCTION

Years ago, when I was in the 2nd grade (yes, about the time of Moses), every morning, we started our day with the teacher leading us in prayer. That was a public school in California. How times have changed!

When I was working with Cru at the Univ of Tenn., I would occasionally go to a high school football game and it was customary to ask a local pastor to pray on the field before the game. Imagine if someone tried that today!

Shawn shared with me that at Deep Freeze Youth Winter Camp a couple years ago, the speaker shared that they did a prayer challenge at school with their students. He said that one of the students kneeled at his locker before school started, and while he was praying another student took a bag full of books and swung it like a bat into the head of the praying student. It knocked the student out and he was sent to the hospital.

I know of a Christian businessman who was told by his boss that he could not keep his Bible on his desk where it was in view of other workers.

I'm sure you students could share things happening at your schools where Christians are made fun of for their faith. Could you carry around a Bible the whole day without someone making a snide comment to you?

Christians in other parts of the world have been facing persecution and suffering for years. We, in the U.S. have largely been exempt from it. However, that is changing. We already see government efforts to restrict the freedom of religion. And we see a growing hostility toward any expression of the Christian life. Anything related to the Bible is automatically rejected.

What do we do? Retreat and go into hiding? Keep our mouths shut? Certainly not. Jesus offers the only true hope of the world, and people need to hear this wonderful message of God's forgiveness through Jesus and see true Christian love lived out in our lives. But that means there is going to be a growing clash of beliefs and persecution for the Christian.

So how do we respond to this growing hostility and persecution? How can God help us? This is what Peter was seeking to do for the Christians in his day, and his message is timely and relevant for us today. When we are persecuted or ridiculed for carrying a Bible, or praying, or mentioning Jesus, how does God want us to respond? In 1 Peter 3, Peter tells us to respond in three ways.

Responding to persecution:**1. Instead of returning evil for evil, bless them (9-12)**

Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. 1 Peter 3:9 ^{NIV}

Peter reveals the kind of persecution that was happening to the Christians. People were doing evil things to them. They were being insulted and facing verbal abuse. In the culture of the first century, it was expected that if someone insulted you, you would insult them back. You would want to defend your honor and reputation. A relevant example of this is the tit-for-tat actions of Israel and the Arabs in the Middle East today. Any provocation by either side is going to bring an immediate response.

Peter's exhortation would have been shocking in his day. And it is just as shocking today.

When we are insulted, we are tempted to insult them back. That's just human nature. And it takes a good amount of self-control to not do that. That's why it is important to be controlled by the Holy Spirit because one of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. And we need the Holy Spirit's help if we are not going to insult someone back.

But notice how we are to go beyond just biting our tongue and not insulting back. We are to bless them!

To bless a person is to ask God to favor them. You may be thinking, how can I do that? That doesn't mean we are asking God to give them joy and peace for their actions. But one way to bless them is to pray for them and ask God to give them understanding of God's ways and how God can give them a better life with Jesus.

God has called us to inherit a blessing. That refers to our future salvation in heaven, with all the incredible things that await us in heaven. No amount of persecution can take away God's blessing in our lives, so that should help us absorb the persecution or insults and seek to respond with the desire that they might experience the same joy and life as we do.

That's what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:11-12 ^{NIV}

When we are persecuted, God gives to us his blessing.

A second way to respond to persecution is:

2. Instead of fearing them, fear Christ (13-15a)

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." ¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. 1 Peter 3:13-15a ^{NIV}

When Peter wrote this letter to the Christians, the great persecutions under Nero had not happened yet. Throughout the Roman empire, persecution was occasional and localized with communities. For the most part, if Christians obeyed the laws and did good, then there wouldn't be much persecution. But even if it did happen, as it did, he told them and tells us, to not be afraid of them. Rather, fear Christ.

Instead of being caught up in the earthly, human moment, let Jesus rule your heart in

the way you should respond. He is the Lord, and he is the one we are to follow and obey. And he can and will help us respond in a way that honors him.

A third response is:

3. Instead of withdrawing from them, be ready to share your hope with them (15b-16)

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. 1 Peter 3:15b-16^{NIV}

In the face of hostilities and persecution, it is natural to take one of two actions: one is to fight; another is to withdraw from people and from society. Christians have done this over the centuries. They have formed communes and towns to insulate themselves from nonchristians. That's what the Mormons did to escape persecution.

But God tells us not to do either. If we leave society and disengage with them, who is going to witness to them?

Every Christian should be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks us why we are Christians. Can you do that? If someone came up to you and said, *Why are you a Christian?*, could you give a clear answer?

Peter anticipates that if someone insults you or persecutes you, and you respond back with blessing them, some people are going to be shocked and wonder why you don't respond back like anyone else. And, for some of them at least, they may be impressed enough to realize that you have something in your faith that they don't have and may want.

In responding to people, Peter reminds us of three essential qualities that need to go along with our witness. We are to respond to people:

- With gentleness

Gentleness includes the idea of humility, courtesy, considerateness, meekness. Instead of getting angry and telling someone off, it's possessing a spirit that is under control; it's having an inner strength, like Jesus had.

We are to treat people:

- With respect

One of the most important attitudes to have toward all people is to respect them because they are made in the image of God. They can be the most radical person in terms of their self-identity and their view of God and Christians, but we are still to treat them with respect.

If we do that, it will go a long way toward developing a relationship that might eventually lead toward a conversation about Jesus.

We are to respond to people:

- With integrity

We are to have a clear conscience. That means if we talk about living for Jesus, are we doing so? That doesn't mean we are going to be perfect Christians. But when we talk about experiencing God's forgiveness and joy, are we? This also means that we can be honest with people and talk about our struggles. That gives us the opportunity to point to how Jesus helps us.

You can see how these responses are not going to be easy. But this is how we are to respond. God does not let us make excuses for our actions if we just respond like nonchristians.

So what can help us respond in the way that God wants? In this section are two helps.

What can help us respond in the right way?

1. Treat our fellow Christians in a loving way (8)

This section begins with v 8 and says:

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. 1 Peter 3:8 ^{NIV}

These qualities refer first to the way we are to treat one another in the church. Peter is saying that while the community outside the church may be full of insults and persecutions, the community inside the church should be a refreshing and helpful community. Our relationships with fellow Christians should help us regain strength and perspective. If we can't have godly and loving relationships with fellow Christians, how are we ever going to have them with those who insult us? Plus, we need each other's support and encouragement. Sundays, especially, should be an oasis from the world around us. In addition, our Life Groups and Adult Bible Fellowships should be a time where we can share our lives with one another and get the support we need to keep living the Christian life in the face of any hostility.

A final help, and really our most important one is to:

2. Remember what Jesus accomplished (18)

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. 1 Peter 3:18 ^{NIV}

Peter ends this section by bringing us back to Jesus and reminding us of what Jesus faced and how he handled it.

Of all the people who should not have been persecuted, it was Jesus. He was righteous in every way. He loved people and helped people. But he was persecuted in spite of his actions.

Earlier, Peter said about Jesus:

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no

threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 1 Peter 2:23^{NIV}

Jesus was insulted, ridiculed and persecuted many times in his ministry, but his pattern was always to not respond back with insults or ridicule. The height of people's verbal and physical abuse came on the cross. Herod and the soldiers ridiculed and abused Jesus, the priests and people insulted and made fun of him. And he responded back by asking God to forgive them.

But it was through his persecution and suffering on the cross that he opened the door for us to come to God.

When we are persecuted for living our Christian faith, we are following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Next Steps:

Is someone giving you a hard time?

1. When someone insults you, smile back.

That should remind you to respond the way God wants you to.

2. Ask God to help you respond in the right way.

You are going to need his help and he wants to give it to you. Ask your fellow Christians to pray for you.

3. Pray for them.