

**“Do Not Fear What They Fear “**

May 21, 2017

Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimm, Florida

**1Peter 3:13-22**

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? **14** But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, **15** but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; **16** yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. **17** For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. **18** For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, **19** in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, **20** who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. **21** And baptism, which this prefigured, 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 made subject to him.

**CHOSEN EXILES**

These past few weeks we've been working our way through Peter's first letter to the Christians in Asia Minor. And through our study of this letter we've learned a few things about the people to whom this letter was written.

First and foremost, they were exiles.

They were viewed with suspicion and fear by the government and by their neighbors.

People were afraid of these Christians because they didn't act like everyone else in society. They said, "Jesus is Lord" instead of saying "Caesar is Lord".

They said that women, children and even slaves were important in God's eyes.

Their lifestyle set them apart from the rest of society.

And, as so often happens when people are afraid of those who are different, prejudice and persecution are not far behind.

What could Peter say to these people who felt like exiles in their own country?

Well, he said first of all, "Do the right thing."

Make sure that you're not using your faith as an excuse to break the law. Be respectful of the proper authorities.

This will be enough to win some people over.

But, if some still persecute you, claim the fact that you are a child of God. No matter what they do; they can't take that away from you.

Their example, of course, is Jesus.

They persecuted Jesus, but that persecution did not have the last word.

In the resurrection God had the last word.

When all is said and done, the same would be true for these persecuted Christians.

Peter says, "The resurrection of Jesus was the harbinger of a new world coming, a new kingdom in which God's righteousness and grace will reign forever."

## A GRACIOUS LIFE

But, in the meantime, these Christians have to learn how to live in a world that is broken by sin. And the Christians response to a broken world is quite different. It is a response based upon love and grace and humility.

In the verses that precede our lesson for today (1 Peter 3:8-12), Peter once again emphasizes the importance of righteous behavior.

This righteous behavior springs from a community that is founded on mutual love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.

Forgiveness is not just an idea for those who follow Jesus. It is something that they put into practice.

Following the example of their Lord, they do not “repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse”.

Instead, they bless others through the practice of forgiveness.

They refuse to be an “eye for an eye” kind of people.

Instead, they break the cycle of violence with the power of grace.

And when Christians bless others in this way, they also are blessed.

Grace is the cure for what ails us.

If you want to be free, let the grievances and the pain of the past go and follow Jesus on the path of righteousness.

So what is the way of righteousness?

Quoting Scripture (Psalm 34) the apostle point out that the gracious life is marked by several characteristics.

## THE PATH OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

First, the gracious person is truthful and is very careful not to lie or say something that will promote ill will.

How we say something is often as important as what we say.

We must be truthful in what we say, but we cannot be harsh either.

The Bible tells us, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (Proverbs 15:1) That’s not always an easy proverb to follow, but I’ve found that it’s absolutely true.

Christians often disagree about a number of doctrinal and political issues. Is the answer to just not talk about religion and politics?

No, the answer is to speak to each other as truthfully as we can and speak to in way that is humble, respectful and offers the opportunity for further dialogue.

Second, the gracious person turns away from evil and does good.

Note that it is not enough just to turn from evil.

It is also important to do what it is right.

The Christian life is not about retreating from the world.  
The Christian life is about transforming the world by doing good, by planting the seeds of grace wherever we go.

And third, the gracious person seeks peace and pursues it.

Notice this also requires action.

Peace is not just about singing, “I’d like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony ...”

That might make a feel good commercial. But, it doesn’t necessarily promote peace.

Peace can only come when we seek it and promote it with what we do and what we say.

The life of grace can make the words of the prophet a reality.

We not only dream of a time when they “shall beat their swords into plowshares”; seeking peace becomes a practical priority in our own lives.

This quotation from Psalm 34 ends with a promise.

In the end, justice will be done.

The Lord hears the prayers of the righteous, and the “face of the Lord is against evildoers.”

## SUFFERING FOR THE GOSPEL

That brings us to our lesson for today.

Peter asks a rhetorical question. Since you know that the Lord hears the prayers of the righteous and stands against the evildoers, why worry? He wrote, “Who will harm you if you are eager to do good?”

Actually, Peter a lot of people will harm you.

In fact sometimes doing God’s will gets us into hot water.

Peacemaking can be a full contact sport.

Sometimes people respond to God’s grace in the most ungracious ways.

The cross of Christ proves attests to that fact.

And in the very next sentence the apostle seems to acknowledge this.

He says, “If you do suffer for what is right, you are blessed.”

Okay, Peter you've lost me again.  
How can suffering for doing the right thing be a blessing?

Peter answers my question this way.

Unjust suffering can give these exiles an opportunity to proclaim the gospel.  
The seed of the gospel often takes root in the soil of turmoil and dislocation.

The gospel challenges the world's assumptions about life.  
The gospel reorders our priorities.  
It shouldn't come as a surprise that preaching the gospel will cause persecution and rejection.

But, we should not be discouraged by rejection and persecution.

The time of turmoil creates an opportunity for change.

The key is to be ready.

The key is to know what we believe and why we believe.

## DO NOT FEAR WHAT THEY FEAR

The next phrase in our lesson forms the title of my sermon, and I think it's the key to bringing the gospel to bear in these times of turmoil. Peter tells these chosen exiles,  
"Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated."

Why would people reject Christ and crucify him?  
Why would people persecute Christians who are model citizens and offer a message of peace and grace?

What motivates people to persecute others?

One word. Fear.  
Fear is used by the empire to keep people in line.  
Fear is used by politicians to gain your vote.  
Fear is used by advertisers to get your money.

They used to say that the key to good salesmanship was to “find a need and fill it”.

I wonder if we need to tweak that phrase.

Maybe we should say that the key to good salesmanship is to, “Find a fear and stoke it”.

The only way these exiled, sometimes persecuted Christians can survive is to deal with their fear.

Notice that Peter does not say, “Don’t be afraid.”

He tells them “not to fear what they fear”.

Don’t give in to the intimidation of the empire or to the prejudice of your neighbors.

Why? Because you fear something else.

You “fear” the Lord.

You “sanctify” Christ as Lord in your hearts.

He reminds them that Caesar is not Lord.

Jesus is Lord.

And the grace of God in Jesus Christ is the focus of their worship.

The Bible tells us,

“The “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who practice it have a good understanding.” (Psalm 111:10)

“Fear” in this case is synonymous with awe inspired worship.

That’s why the fear of the Lord can be “practiced”.

Worship gives us the strength to stand up to the world and offer a new way of life.

When we worship God in Spirit and in Truth we prepare ourselves for spiritual battle.

To put it another way, we present an alternative way of life, a new way of looking at the world and what is really important. The fear of the empire, the fear of the politician, the fear of materialism can only control us if we buy into their presuppositions ... if we fear what they fear.

But, if we immerse ourselves in a new way of life.

If we worship God instead of human beings, we have an opportunity to calm the fears of the world instead of stoking them.

If in our heart we believe that Christ is Lord, then we have an opportunity to preach the peace of Christ that passes all understanding to those that have no peace.

This passage teaches us that we get a chance to preach God's peace not only with what we say but how we say it.

Peter tells these maligned Christians,  
 "Go ahead and tell your persecutors why you follow Jesus.  
 But, make sure you do it in a gentle way and with a sense of reverence."

That word translated "reverence" is the same word translated "fear" previously in verse 14. In difficult situations worship must go hand in hand with witness.

## SHAME AND SALVATION

Oddly enough when we present the message of God's grace in word and deed quite often the anger of the persecutor escalates.

There's a reason for this.

Peter wrote, "Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame."

The gracious actions of the follower of Christ puts the persecutor to shame. The true motive of the persecutor is no longer hidden. They see themselves as they really are and this causes the anger to escalate.

When peaceful protesters are attacked by the minions of an unjust ruler, we see his true colors.

They can no longer hide behind the charade of just trying to protect the people.

When Christ was crucified, the politicians and the religious leaders showed their true colors.

The shame of the cross was their shame.  
 Indeed, it was the shame of the world.

Those struggling exiles in the ancient world were reminded that at one time they were on the other side of this divide. They were put to shame in light of the cross.

But, through the grace of God those that were (as Paul once put it) “far away” have now “come near”.

This is the message that allows all of us to endure difficult situations for the sake of the gospel.

We identify with those who have been put to shame by their persecution of Christ.

We are in the same sinful boat  
... adrift in our own sea of fear and guilt.

But, by the grace of God we are forgiven.  
The suffering of Christ was not in vain.

In our lesson for today we read,

“For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.”

That last phrase is important.  
... “in order to bring you to God.”  
I’ve mentioned it many times before.  
On the cross Jesus said,

“Father forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.”

I’ve come to believe that he was talking about more than just those that crucified him that day.

I think he was talking about us,  
... all of us.

## COME TO JESUS MOMENT

Where I grew up we talked about judgment in a way that was sacrilegious and betrayed some very poor theology.

We talked about a “come to Jesus” moment.

When we said that, we were going to confront someone, and make them cry out for divine help!

But, there is a kernel of truth to that statement.

There is such a thing as a come to Jesus moment, but it is more than just judgement.

It is also salvation.

When we begin to understand the theology of the cross, when we begin to understand that Christ suffered for our sins on the cross, when we take it personally ...

... then that really is a come to Jesus moment.

We are put to shame.

We are judged.

But, the purpose of this judgment is salvation.

The purpose of this judgment is to unmask the evil in our own life, so that we can receive forgiveness.

The purpose of this shame is to replace our fear with worship.

The great hymn, Amazing Grace gives us insight into this dynamic.

“Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace those fears relieved.”

This understanding of salvation will lead us to approach those outside the faith with a sense of hope. If God could bring us near, God can do it with others.

This is the reason we can love and pray for our enemies.

It is because God in Christ loved and prayed for us “while we were yet sinners”.

We don’t view our enemies through the lens of who they are today.

We view our enemies through the lens of how they might be transformed by the grace of God.

We know it’s possible because it has happened to us.

## NEW CREATION

There is a passage in our lesson for today that is notoriously difficult to interpret.

In verses 18 and 19 Peter states that after the resurrection Jesus “made a proclamation to the spirits in prison who in former times did not obey ...”

In particular Peter mentioned the folks who, in the time of Noah, ignored God’s warning and perished in the flood.

Exactly what does this mean?

The short answer is: I don’t know.

And neither do a lot of people who are smarter than me.

This is the only passage like this in the New Testament.

Some have speculated that when Jesus descended into “hell” or more accurately the place of the dead, “Sheol,” he preached to the spirits of the departed.

That’s a nice thought, and of course God could do that. But that’s reading more into the passage than is really there.

I would suggest that we shouldn’t take this too literally.

Peter is using a story from Israel’s past as something that prefigures what God is doing today.

Peter is interpreting Scripture in light of the situation faced by these chosen exiles in Asia Minor.

Let me expand Peter’s argument and see if I can make it more plain.

God judged the world with the flood, but God did not completely destroy the world.

He preserved Noah’s family and the world of nature on the ark.

In Peter’s mind the flood was like a baptism that brought about a fresh start for the world.

It was, in a way, a new creation.

Well, the same thing happens when the Spirit of the risen Christ touches the hearts of those who are dead in sin.

They die to the old way of life and rise to become new creations. The power of the resurrection transforms the lives who are touched by the message of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Peter says that baptism is not just a few tweaks here and there. It's not just the removal of dirt.

It's a rebirth based not upon what we can do but upon what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Each week I say it.  
In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

You may have noticed that I take my time with the assurance of pardon each week.  
I try to look at many of you as I say it.

Why?  
Because I want you to take it personally.

We are forgiven.  
We are transformed by the power of God's grace.  
We get a do over.

That really is good news.  
It is a salvation that comes from heaven and changes things today.  
We are released from our self-imposed prisons of sin and guilt.

We can approach life with (as Peter put it) a "good conscience".

We don't rely upon our ability to do the right thing.  
We rely upon forgiveness.  
We rely upon the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The world tells us that we're not good enough.  
The world wants us to be afraid.  
And then the world uses those fears to control us, to keep us in our place.

Peter tells these exiles who faced many fearful situations,

“You should have a good conscience.  
Yes, you’re exiles.  
But, you’re God’s exiles.

You are God’s chosen people.  
You have been forgiven and freed to live with a sense of purpose and hope.”

And I would give you the same message today.

I began this series of sermons by saying that we’re all exiles ... in one way or another.

We never feel entirely comfortable with who we are and where we live.  
Life is short and constantly changing.

But, we cannot let fear win.  
We cannot fear what the world fears.

Instead we worship.  
We give heart and soul to the grace of God as revealed in Jesus.  
We come each week and remember with fear and trembling,

“In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.”

Amen.