

“Blessing Those Who Curse Us!”

1 Peter 3:13-17

January 7, 2007

Dr. Jerry Nelson

My wife and I were at dinner last evening with several friends.

In the course of conversation I brought up the subject of ethics in the workplace.

Specifically I asked if any of them had ever been asked to do something for their supervisor that was unethical or even illegal.

I was somewhat surprised that several immediately identified with such situations.

Three told stories of being asked to falsify reports to the advantage of certain people or the company.

Each told of the pressure to comply and the difficulty of refusing especially under the threat of intimidation or even loss of income.

One had to resign to avoid the conflict.

To my knowledge, in none of those situations, was it initiated because of the Christian faith of my friends, but there would have been no problem to begin with if they had not defended Christian values.

Doing the right thing, doing the good thing is not always well received and sometimes it is ridiculed or worse.

Many Christian young people can tell stories of being intimidated and ridiculed for their faith and even their moral actions.

I can recall times in both high school and college when the Apostle Peter's words were borne out in my own experience:

1 Peter 4:3-4 “For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do--living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. ⁴ They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.”

Doing the right thing is not always met with applause!

The text before us today deals with the same issues that the Apostle Peter has been stressing in much of his letter: How to live Christianly in a non-Christian world.

Specifically it is about doing the right thing even when we are opposed.

Even more specifically it is about doing good to others and even doing good to others when they react negatively.

I think “good works” have taken a “bad rap” in evangelical circles.

So many religions, including perversions of Christianity, have made good works **the means** by which we gain a right standing with God.

Evangelicals have rightly resisted such teaching.

We understand that a relationship with God is by his grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

But we have tended to throw the baby of good works out with the bathwater of bad theology - works righteousness.

We’ve become almost afraid of talking about good works lest we be misunderstood.

But the Bible is not afraid of talking about them.

In fact the Bible connects good works to our salvation but differently than some suppose.

Ephesians 2:8-10 “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **to do good works**...”

The text is clear that we are saved by grace through faith but to what end?

- Are we saved merely to go to heaven when we die?
- Are we saved merely to refrain from certain sinful activities?

You’d think those were the purposes of many who call themselves Christians.

They think of Christianity merely as having assurance of heaven when they die and in the mean time just living life trying hard not to do anything too bad.

Is that what Ephesians 2 says? NO!

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **to do good works**...”

That’s very consistent with what Peter has told us already:

1 Peter 2:20b-21 “If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. ²¹ To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.

To what were you called?

You are called to do good, and even if you suffer for it.

Then a verse we looked at last week:

1 Peter 3:9 “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

You were called to be a blessing and even if you suffer evil and insult.

So again, to what have we been called by God?

- Remembering the great commission, you might say, “We’ve been called to make disciples.”
- Remembering the great commandment, you might say, “We’ve been called to love the Lord our God.”
- Remembering Jesus’ words to his disciples, you might say, “We’ve been called to follow Jesus.”

Yes, we are called to make disciples, to love God and to follow Jesus, but how?

Listen to Peter’s words in Acts 10:37-38 where he describes Jesus’ actions: “You know...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how **he (Jesus) went around doing good...**”

And when Jesus sent his disciples out in Matthew 10 he sent them out to do what he had been doing.

Matthew 10:8 “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.”

I think it is correct to say that we have been called to good works.

Consistent with that is the way Peter begins the whole section we have been studying in recent weeks:

1 Peter 2:11-12 “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. ¹² **Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds** and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Following that guiding principle, Peter then gives four examples of situations wherein we are called to do good even if we are opposed.

1 Peter 2:13-17 Doing good among governing authorities even if they try to intimidate you.

1 Peter 2:15 “For it is God's will that by **doing good** you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.”

1 Peter 2:18-21 Doing good among masters even when they abuse you.

1 Peter 2:20 “if you suffer for **doing good** and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

1 Peter 3:1-7 Doing good even to a spiritually contrary spouse.

1 Peter 3:1-2 “They may be won over without words by the **behavior** of their wives, when they see the **purity and reverence** of your lives.

1 Peter 3:8-12 Doing good to each other even when treated unjustly.

1 Peter 3:11 “He must turn from evil and **do good**; he must seek peace and pursue it.

And so we come to the text for today:

3:13-17 "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 what they fear; do not be frightened." ¹⁵ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. 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. ¹⁷ It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

In the midst of doing good we may still face hostility.
How are we to respond?

I want you to see the principle that Peter lays down first of all:

1 Peter 3:13 "Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?"

I live on a cul-de-sac.

This last Friday morning during the most recent snowfall, I went out about 6 in the morning to clear the driveway and walks.

I was again surprised to see that my driveway had already been shoveled.

I say again, because this has happened several times in the past few years.

All of us who live on that cul-de-sac are blessed to have a neighbor named Frank.

Frank was up before 5 that morning shoveling the drives of all of us.

He had also been out at about 3 a.m. to do the first shoveling.

It seems he is also the first to know about a sickness or a hospitalization in the neighborhood and the first to seek to help.

Frank has made it part of his life to serve the rest of us.

There are some things about Frank that might make him less socially accepted than others, but it is really hard not to like him.

What I mean is that there might be things to be said about Frank that aren't very flattering, but try to say those things in our neighborhood and you'd be met with resistance.

Why? Because Frank's kindness tempers whatever ill could be spoken of him.

The Apostle Peter reminds us first of all that much hostility can be avoided simply by doing what we have been called to do – do good to others.

It is difficult for others to speak maliciously of someone who is kind and generous.

Much of what some Christians call persecution would evaporate if they weren't such contrary, cantankerous, pushy, and judgmental people.

I've spent too much time with people who are convinced they are being persecuted for their faith when the truth is they are being disliked for their personalities.

Peter doesn't call us to be zealous to convict people of sin; instead he calls us to be zealous, eager to do good.

It is good, which makes the truth of the Good News both hearable and convincing.

God forgive us for being proselytizers when we have been called to be lovers.

But Peter goes on to talk about the exceptions – those times when we are treated unfairly because of our relationship with Jesus.

1 Peter 3:14 “But even if you should suffer **for what is right**, you are blessed.

A quick aside is important here.

Much of what many Christians call suffering is not what the authors of the Bible are talking about when they speak of suffering.

The suffering in mind here is not the grief we experience at the death of a loved one or the pain we experience due to illness or accident.

The suffering here is not even the emotions we feel when other disappointing things happen in life.

The suffering Peter is talking about is suffering for what is right.

Notice what else Peter says: 1 Peter 3:14 “But **even if** you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.

Peter does not say “when” but “if.”

Constant suffering is not the lot of every believer.

We should not get it in our heads that we must be unfaithful unless we are suffering for Jesus.

Such thinking is not only wrong but also leads to finding persecution in every slight offense.

Sometimes negative experiences come our way not because we are Christians doing good but because some others are just inconsiderate or even mean.

But sometimes it **IS** suffering for what is right.

Speak in favor of abstinence as the best prophylactic against disease and even against abused unwanted children and you are met with derision.

Make pro-life statements advocating for the unborn who has no choice and you face harsh criticism.

“Evangelical” which means one who believes the good news has become synonymous with the bad news of bigotry and ignorance.

The new Speaker of the House can stand before the nation and finish her oath of office with “so help me God.”

And yet if you just mention the name God in many of our educational institutions and you are immediately suspect.

In our culture no other faith is treated with as much open disdain and ridicule as evangelical Christianity.

And this is especially ironic when you consider how many people consider themselves “born again” Christians.

Increasingly in our universities and even in workplaces, to claim Christianity is to marginalize yourself.

Ask any student; it's not just pastors who have experienced what it feels like to be treated as a leper the minute you mention Jesus.

Peter says we are blessed when we suffer in this way.

That's sounds rather odd.

It doesn't feel like blessing.

But here is what Jesus said in Matthew 5:11-12 "**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.

First of all there is a future blessing in heaven for those who remained faithful through persecution.

Secondly listen to Peter in 1 Peter 1:6-7 "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that your faith...may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed..."

Suffering for your faith proves the **genuineness** of your faith.

You are blessed, you take encouragement, when you realize you stand in the good company of Jesus and the prophets who were treated this way for their beliefs.

You can tell a lot about a person by his or her adversaries.

So Peter says our basic posture toward others is to do good to them.

Reminding us that people don't usually respond negatively to goodness toward them.

But sometimes they will still treat us unjustly in spite of our good works and sometimes because of the good works.

Yes, we understand that in a very important sense we are blessed in that.

But what do we do when we are opposed or ridiculed for doing good and doing the right thing?

There are two reactions: One internal and one external.

First the internal:

1 Peter 3:14b-15 “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.” But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”

Our response to the criticism or even persecution we face for being Christians starts in our own hearts.

We will cave in to criticism, we will abandon our Christian principles, or we will yield to temptation to go along with the crowd unless we have our heads on straight, our convictions clearly identified.

We naturally fear the threat of persecution.

We fear being ostracized in school, at work, in our neighborhoods or in our homes.

We don't like being called or even considered ignorant or bigoted.

As I illustrated earlier, a boss might actually threaten our job and livelihood because of our stand for the right, the good, and the ethical.

I remember Joe Cela's situation about four years ago.

His supervisor's personal lifestyle was threatened by what Evangelicals believe and in the city government office where they worked, she was so militantly anti-Christian that she found every opportunity to make work difficult for Joe.

To finally remove him from his job she charged sexual harassment.

Joe won the case but lost his job.

What do we need in the midst of such opposition?

We need to know what we believe and believe what we know.
We need to again “set apart Christ as Lord.”

Peter was using the wording of Isaiah 8:13 at this point:

Isaiah 8:13 “The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread...”

We must stop and again realize that there is only one God – Jesus is Lord.

My allegiance to him is higher and greater than all other allegiances.

It is much more important to have ultimate respect for him and to have his approval than the approval of any others.

Jesus said, Luke 12:4-7 “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. (But this “fear” doesn’t produce anxiety; it produces peace) “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

Putting Christ first, considering him above all other things, puts other fears in their proper place.

Why wouldn’t Peter stop preaching the gospel in Jerusalem when he was threatened with death?

Because he respected and trusted God more than man.

Why would some of our Northeast Indian students keep going into Hindu villages praying for their sick and bringing them help even when they are beaten for it?

Because they believe the truth of Jesus and the future Jesus promises and they respect the authority of Jesus over their lives above all other authorities.

Why would you continue to teach your kids the Bible when your extended family treats you as a member of a dangerous cult?

Because in your heart you have set Christ apart as Lord.

We start with knowing what we believe and believing what we know.

But not only is there the internal decision to set Christ apart as Lord, there is also our external reaction to criticism and persecution.

Here's what Peter says:

1 Peter 3:15-16 "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, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."

What is to be our response to those who abuse us because of our faith?

Continue to do good toward them – "Keep a clear conscience."

Can you imagine how our relationships would change, even in our homes and among fellow Christians if we responded to each other the way God is telling us to respond to those who criticize or even abuse us?

1 Peter 3:9 "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called..."

Jesus said, Luke 6:27-28 "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

How is this possible?

It is possible if, in our hearts, we truly have set Christ apart as Lord.

1 Peter 2:23 "When they hurled their insults at him, (Jesus) did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."

His allegiance, his confidence, his respect for the Father God was greater than any threat and any abuse.

But Peter says one other thing about our response to those who accuse, abuse, slander, and mistreat us for being Christians:

1 Peter 3:15-16 “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, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.”

Whenever I read these verses I feel inadequate because I compare myself to Hank Hannegraff, Lee Strobel or Ravi Zacharias who are very capable defenders of the faith.

But I’m now convinced that God is not asking us to have their capabilities.

He’s simply asking us to, not combatively and offensively, but gently and respectfully tell the person who asks why our hope is in Jesus.

When attacked, we are very tempted to withdraw from those who question us.

But one man said it well; “Faith does not close doors to relationships with other people out of either fear or hate. It turns, rather, in openness to others just as it turns to God.”

(Goppelt in Jobes, 230)

Or another who wrote, “Cultural isolation is not to be the route taken by the Christian community. It is to live its life openly in the midst of the unbelieving world and just as openly be prepared to explain the reasons for it.” (Achetemeier in Jobes, 230)

And so when we are charged with hypocrisy – we simply respond with greater integrity.

And when our motives are challenged – we respond with more good done in love.

And when our Christianity is questioned— we respond with gentleness and respect giving the reason for the hope we have – but always in the context of our good works toward them (keeping a clear conscience).

Always with a clear conscience, because it is useless to make a case for Christ while we are counter-attacking those who mistreat us.

Our actions will always speak louder than our words.

I've told the story before but it bears repeating in this context:

In the former Yugoslavia there was an evangelist by the name of Jakov who met a man named Cimmerman in one of the towns.

He befriended Cimmerman and then tried to tell him of Jesus' love for him.

Cimmerman abruptly interrupted Jakov and told him he wanted to hear nothing more about it.

Christianity for Cimmerman carried a very different meaning. He spoke of the past when in the name of Christianity some had come to their town and amidst much plundering and killing had even killed his own nephew.

Jakov was distressed over how he could get Cimmerman to understand that those who had done so much wrong were not truly Christ-followers.

He said to Cimmerman - suppose I were to steal your coat and then wearing it were to rob a bank.

Suppose further, the police saw me in the distance, not recognizing me but recognizing your coat.

What would you say to them if they came to your house and accused you of robbing the bank?

“Well I would deny it said Cimmerman.

“Ah, but we saw your coat - they would say.

This analogy annoyed Cimmerman

Jakov would return from time to time to that village and each time would look for Cimmerman, befriending him, encouraging him and sharing with him the love of Christ without mentioning Jesus' name.

Finally one day, months later, Cimmerman asked Jakov, "how does one become a Christian."

Jakov was delighted and taught him the simple steps of expressing repentance and faith.

Cimmerman bowed his knees and surrendered his life to Christ.

As he rose to his feet he turned to Jakov, embraced him and said, "thank you for being in my life". Then pointing skyward he said, **"You wear his coat well."** (Marie Chapien)

1 Peter 3:13-17 "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 what they fear; do not be frightened." ¹⁵ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. 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. ¹⁷ It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.