

show respect and gentleness toward the unbeliever and the truth is he has already said that is what we should do. He has already said to honor the King and to submit to those in authority. But I think Peter is realistic here. The truth is... when we are being insulted for our faith it is hard to respond toward the person with gentleness and respect. So instead, Peter says essentially lift your head up. Stop looking at them and look at God. For when we fear God and not others and when we revere God, then we act toward others as God intends.

Let me give us one more thought from the text. Peter tells us to respond to a culture and individual that insults the church with this thought "God is at work." I think when we feel threatened by actions and words of others we begin to wonder if God is at work. Is God still in control? There are many Christians today wringing their hands at the change that we see in our American culture and some are angry, some are fearful, some are resigned and defeated, some deal with it by being silent and ignore it. I want to end this sermon with the hopeful words of Peter.

Peter reminds us that God is at work. He reminds the believer that they belong to God through Jesus. He reminds them that Jesus died for their sins and has saved them. They belong to God. He even reminds them that God does not give up. He mentions an odd thought that Jesus preached to the spirits in prison who God waited on patiently in the days of Noah. This is where we get the phrase "descended into hell" in the Apostles Creed. Now there are so many issues with this passage that we do not have the time to delve into it all. Some believe it speaks of Jesus preaching to the evil angels that we find in Genesis. Others say it was Jesus descending into hell to give the gospel message to those who died prior to his coming. Others see it as a simple statement of the completeness of Jesus' death. They point out that the term is hades the abode of the dead not so much hell as a place of punishment so the verse has more to do with the completeness of Jesus' death burial and resurrection. It was a full experience.

As I have studied this, I want to give you a practical application to this odd and difficult verse. There is no where we can go, there is nothing we can experience, there is no suffering we might suffer, there is no insult that might be hurled at us, there is no fear that we might be experiencing that Jesus is not already there with a

word of hope. God's love is so amazing toward us and others, that it is even extended to the wicked generation of Noah. If that is the case, then surely God's love extends to our generation. Surely Jesus loves even those who might insult us.

One day a group of southern women went to the fresh graves of their loved ones who had died in a terrible and divisive war. At the time, they did not know it but it was the most terrible and divisive moment in the history of our nation. All they knew was that their loved ones were dead as the result of war. They went there with fresh cut flowers to decorate their graves as a way of saying you are not forgotten. In that moment... as they grieved and remembered, they saw the graves of their enemies. In that moment... they could have reacted in so many ways. They could have insulted their enemies. They could have disrespected their graves. They could have simply ignored them and walked away. Yet, they took some of the flowers of their loved ones graves and placed them on the graves of their enemies. They remembered that day that these too were men loved by moms, children, wives and friends. They remembered that we all share this common humanity and we all will stand before God. Maybe they even remembered God loves our enemies and us with the same amazing love.

What if you and me, followers of Jesus, were to remember this every day? What would happen if we would in our hearts set apart Christ as Lord?



SET CHRIST APART

1 Peter 3:13-22



Memorial Day has become a national holiday and was set-aside for us to remember all who have died in service to our nation. A little history lesson this morning would be good for us all.

According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs:

Three years after the Civil War ended, on May 5, 1868, the head of an organization of Union veterans — the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) — established Decoration Day as a time for the nation to decorate the graves of the war dead with flowers. Maj. Gen. John A. Logan declared that Decoration Day should be observed on May 30. It is believed that date was chosen because flowers would be in bloom all over the country. The first large observance was held that year at Arlington National Cemetery, across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C.

The ceremonies centered on the mourning-draped veranda of the Arlington mansion, once the home of Gen. Robert E. Lee. Various Washington officials, including Gen. and Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant, presided over the ceremonies. After speeches, children from the Soldiers' and Sailors' Orphan Home and members of the GAR made their way through the cemetery, strewing flowers on both Union and Confederate graves, reciting prayers and singing hymns.

However, prior to this national observance there were local observances:

In 1966, Congress and President Lyndon Johnson declared Waterloo, N.Y., the "birthplace" of Memorial Day. There, a ceremony on May 5, 1866, honored local veterans who had fought in the Civil War. Businesses closed and residents flew flags at half-staff. Supporters of Waterloo's claim say earlier observances in other places were informal, not community-wide or one-time events.

By the end of the 19th century, Memorial Day ceremonies were being held on May 30 throughout the nation. State legislatures passed proclamations designating the day, and the Army and Navy adopted regulations for proper observance at their facilities.

It was not until after World War I, however, that the day was expanded to honor those who have died in all American wars. In 1971, Memorial Day was declared a national holiday by an act of Congress, though it is still often called Decoration Day. It was then also placed on the last Monday in May, as were some other federal holidays.

This weekend in the midst of our vacation going, beach sitting, mountain viewing, pool parties, lake get-togethers, cook-outs and family and friends fellowship... we hopefully will pause for a moment to remember those who gave their lives for our freedom.

Now what does this have to do with "Putting on Christ" from 1 Peter 3? Let me continue with one more story of Memorial Day, which of course was first known as Decoration Day. There is a story from the early days following the Civil War of widows and others who gathered to decorate the graves of the Confederate Soldiers. After decorating the graves of their fallen husbands, sons and brothers they noticed the Union Soldier's Grave in the same location. No one was there to decorate these graves or mourn their loss. So, these southern women did something amazing. They did something very Christ like. They gathered flowers and they placed them on the graves of the very men who may have actually taken the lives of the ones they loved. In that moment there were no enemies, no North and South, no Union and Confederacy... only mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters mourning husbands, sons, friends and brothers.

As I thought about our text for this day and this being Memorial Day, I thought about that story.

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The story of those who in the aftermath of that terrible war where we really were at war with one another, how these women reduced it all to a very human and common moment and mourned both sides. For you see, 1 Peter 3:13-22 are instructions on how we should react to those in culture who might disagree with us and even persecute us as followers of Jesus.

I don't want to spend much time today bemoaning our cultural divide, but we know it to be true. Poll after poll reveals the deep divide politically in our nation. No matter what side of the political aisle you might find yourself upon, there is great frustration for our elected leaders ability to work with each other and many times just have a cordial and constructive conversation that does not deteriorate into insults and name calling.

However, as a famous French poet and philosopher said "a democracy gets the government they deserve." In other words, we cannot expect more of our elected leaders until we expect more of ourselves.

Here in Peter's letter the persecution of the church is beginning. There is really no evidence in Peter's letter that there is physical persecution, but there is a strong evidence of tension between the government and the church. There seems to be the suggestion of cultural division and insults toward the church and fear within the church. How would Peter tell them to react?

In Chapter 2 he tells them to show proper respect to everyone. To love one another and fear God and honor the King. He even tells Christian slaves to submit to their masters and not only to those who are good to them, but to those who mistreat them. Peter goes on to say this in Chapter 2:21 "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps." He committed, "no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth." When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Peter continues this train of thought in the passage we read earlier. In this passage he give us five responses when we find ourselves in conflict with others and especially when we might feel insulted because of our faith in Jesus. Let's look at Peter's encouragement.

First Peter tells us not to fear. Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good. But even if you should suffer

for what is right you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear do not be frightened. Last week we talked about how fear can freeze us, but fear can also cause us to act and react in ways that are not pleasing to Christ. When we are fearful for ourselves, our children, our future, our nation, or loosing our influence it is easy for us to act and react in ways that are not like Christ.

One of my concerns for us as the church in America today is that we seem to always take the bait for the next fight. It is very natural for us as human beings to defend and respond defensively when we feel threatened. That is why following Jesus is so difficult sometimes. The one we follow, we are told by Peter, did not retaliate. When they hurled insults at Jesus he did not respond with insults. Yet, when we are fearful that is our normal response. Yet, Peter says do not be fearful. Do not fear what they fear.

Well the obvious question is who is "they" and what do they fear? "They" refers to those who were insulting the church. They feared their way of life being challenged. They feared the unknown that the church was becoming. They feared the loss of control and the loss of power. Notice that Peter says "do not fear what they fear." There are some translations that suggest this should read, "Do not fear their intimidation." Here the emphasis is not to fear others, but to fear God. Peter's admonition is to realize that there is nothing that others can do to the follower of Jesus that is eternal.

One of my favorite songs is by the late Mark Heard a Christian songwriter from the 1980s and 90s. Mark Heard writes in his song Eye of the Storm:

*When the daybreak comes with a trumpet blast,
And the true fruit of faith is tasted at long-last,
When the darkness dies and death is undone
And teardrops are dried in the noonday sun.*

*In this world
Thunder throbs in the darkness
Out in the eye of the storm
The friends of God suffer no permanent harm.*

Mark Heard reminds us that yes, there comes a day when death is done, and tears come to an end however in this world there are troubles and suffering but for friends of God there is no permanent harm. There is nothing anyone or any institution or any culture can do to the church that is permanent. That is eternal. Why do we live in such fear?

Second, Peter says "set Christ Apart in your hearts as Lord." The emphasis here is to intentionally remember the Christ is Lord. One of the most interesting parts of

this instruction has to do with the term "in your hearts." When we think of the heart we think of the emotion feelings, but we need to think of "in your hearts" as something more.

Thomas Shriener writes in the NAC on 1 Peter:

The heart is the origin of human behavior and from it flows everything people do. Hence, setting Christ apart as Lord in the heart is not merely a private reality but evident to all when believers suffer for their faith. The inner and outer life is inspirable for what happens within will inevitably be displayed to all especially when one suffers.

So it is when we respond to insults and threats when we follow Christ. We set Christ apart as Lord in our hearts. Meaning that which we believe flows into a public display. If in our hearts we love as Jesus loves, if we forgive as Jesus forgives, then that is what will flow from our lives. However, if we fear what we should not fear or if we do not trust that God is ultimately in control, then that fear will flow from us as well.

Jesus put it this way "it is not what goes into one's mouth that defiles him, but that which comes from his mouth." Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? 18But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. 19For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

We have to decide if we going to set Christ apart as Lord. In other words, we have to decide are we going to follow Jesus or not. Or we going to say one thing and then do another or say we believe one thing and yet continually react and act toward those who insult us in another way. Set Christ apart in you hearts as Lord.

Third, Peter says "be prepared to give an answer for the hope you have." Peter does not suggest that the Christian response is silence. The insults needed a response, but the response was not another insult but it was a word of hope. Just the spirit of the two words is different. Those who feared the church and despised the follower of Jesus

insults and threats. The Christian response a word of hope.

Peter uses the word hope and not faith. Hope was important to Peter's instructions. The idea here is that the believer lives in a hopeful state. We are hopeful because we know this world is not the last word. We live in a hopeful state because we serve a God who can transform lives and will one day recreate heaven and earth. The Christian can respond to others with hope because of their faith.

The believer responds to the non-believer not out of fear but out of hope. They know that their life and their future is not dependent on the circumstances of this world, but the promises of God.

Peter adds to be prepared to give an answer for this hope. We must prepare. How do we prepare? First we pray. We need to take seriously prayer for our enemies and those who would insult the church. We need to study the Bible. We need to articulate our faith. A great practice is to every now and then sit down and write our what you believe when it comes to your faith in Jesus. Could you articulate your faith to others, even if that faith is filled with as many questions as convictions? We need to be able to articulate our faith and our hope in Jesus. Here

is why that is important. When we are prepared we are not just reacting. It is when we are reacting to others that we can fall into the trap of returning insult for insult. However, when we have prepared ourselves we are able to act and react from a different place.

So, Peter says the response to the insults and threats is not silence but it is a response that is prepared and he adds it is done in gentleness and respect. Because we are prepared in our faith we respond to those who insult us not with more insults but with a hope in Christ and we do so with gentleness and respect.

Gentleness is such an interesting word. It means to have great power under control. However, the word here in Peter is not gentleness in the Greek. The word is phobia or fear. The second word is reverence. The question then, is Peter saying we should fear and have a reverence for those who insult the believer? That is not the case. In fact, these words refer more to our view of God than toward the unbeliever. Peter could write this in a way to

IF IN OUR HEARTS WE LOVE AS JESUS LOVES, IF WE FORGIVE AS JESUS FORGIVES, THEN THAT IS WHAT WILL FLOW FROM OUR LIVES. HOWEVER, IF WE FEAR WHAT WE SHOULD NOT FEAR OR IF WE DO NOT TRUST THAT GOD IS ULTIMATELY IN CONTROL, THEN THAT FEAR WILL FLOW FROM US AS WELL.