

FIRST PETER 3:13–22. (EHV, alt.)

Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you should happen to suffer because of righteousness, you are blessed. Do not be afraid of what they fear, and do not be troubled. But set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is in you. But speak with gentleness and respect, while maintaining a clear conscience, so that those who attack your good way of life in Christ may be put to shame because they slandered you as evildoers. Indeed, it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil, because Christ also suffered once for sins in our place, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in flesh but was made alive in spirit, in which he also went and made an announcement to the spirits in prison. These spirits disobeyed long ago, when God's patience was waiting in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In this ark a few, that is, eight souls, were saved by water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the body but the guarantee of a good conscience before God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He went to heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

One of the most common self-complaints I hear from Christians, and I myself can certainly relate to it, is that they don't speak up, or know how to speak up, for Christianity when they have the opportunity to do so. They admire that ability in others, when they see them speak up clearly, confidently, and tactfully. I think that's one of the reasons the early Christians' trials before the Sanhedrin and Luther's stand at the diet of Worms captivate our imaginations. So it bothers them when they don't see it done in their own lives.

How can we answer for Christianity confidently? Peter answers that question for us this morning. He not only shows us why we can answer for Christianity confidently, but also what our answers can and should consist of.

1. Why

Here toward the end of Peter's first letter, Peter gives general instructions to all Christians, telling them to show sympathy, brotherly love, compassion, and humility, telling them to do good and seek peace and not to repay evil with evil or insult with insult. He knows these encouragements will hit home with his audience, because they are undergoing various kinds of trials for their faith, including persecution by others. And of course the temptation when others are ridiculing and mistreating you is to ridicule and mistreat them back.

So Peter first reminds them that they're much less likely to endure ridicule and mistreatment if they don't repay evil with evil and insult with insult. "Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?" It's hard for people to keep doing you wrong and badmouthing you if you keep repaying it with kindness. The apostle Paul calls that heaping burning coals on their head (Rom. 12:20). Peter himself says later that such people are likely to be ashamed or to be put to shame by others, because it will become clear to themselves or others that they are acting wickedly.

But Peter does acknowledge that, in a sinful, fallen world, sometimes unbelievers will mistreat us simply because we are speaking and living as Christians. But even then, “if you should happen to suffer because of righteousness, you are blessed. Do not be afraid of what they fear, and do not be troubled.” Peter is reminding us that we can answer for Christianity confidently, and that includes living as Christians confidently, because God blesses us when we do so. Peter had just quoted from Psalm 34: “For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their requests. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” Even if we are mistreated by humans for speaking the truth and doing what is right, God will bless us and he will see that those who stubbornly remain our adversaries are brought to justice.

Oftentimes people respond in kind to those who ridicule and mistreat them for one of two reasons: Either they think that they’re just going to keep on getting abused and taken advantage of and mistreated unless they fight for respect, or they do it because they’re trying to mask their fear, like an animal caught in a trap that hisses or screams or growls as you approach it, not because it has the upper hand and is showing off its power, but because it senses what’s coming. But we don’t need to fight for respect with the God of the universe on our side. We don’t need to mask our fear with meanness when the face of the Lord himself is against our enemies. When we act the same way unbelievers do, we’re not setting apart Christ as Lord in our hearts, but we’re elevating human words, actions, and authority to the place of lordship in our hearts.

Peter then points us to the example of Christ, who also suffered for doing what was right. He not only suffered at the hands of unrighteous people, but he suffered for those unrighteous people. And what happened to his enemies who seemed to have the upper hand when they put him to death on the cross? Some of them seem to have been converted, like the centurion who said, “Surely this was the Son of God!” The only way most people know Pontius Pilate now is through that one phrase in our creed, “suffered under Pontius Pilate,” and it’s not a creed devoted to the glory of Pontius Pilate, but to the glory of Jesus. All of them are dead now, and those who weren’t converted are suffering eternally in hell. God the Father saw to the justice of Jesus’s enemies and he saw to the glorification of Jesus.

And what glorification he received! “Christ also suffered once for sins in our place, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in flesh,” that is, in his lowly or humble state when he did not make full or frequent use of his power and glory as God, “but was made alive in spirit,” that is, in his exalted state when he once again took up his power and glory as God, “in which [state] he also went and made an announcement to the spirits in prison.” There’s only one prison in which spirits are held, and that’s hell. This is in fact the only passage in Scripture that talks about Christ’s descent into hell. In a way, we could talk about Christ descending into hell on Good Friday, when he suffered the pain of hell that we all deserved in our place. But Peter’s clearly not talking about that here. He’s talking about a trip to the spirit-prison after Jesus was made alive in spirit, that is, at some point after he came back to life on the third day.

Jesus went and made an announcement or preached to the spirits in hell. We know from other passages in Scripture that this could not have been any sort of preaching to convert them or to save them. We are destined to die once and after that to face eternal judgment. This therefore had to be an announcement of victory, and announcement that, although those spirits, particularly the spirits of those who perished in the flood in Noah’s day, had probably been spending their

time complaining that they didn't deserve to be there, they clearly did deserve to be there, because God kept his word and his promises and sent his Son and raised him from the dead. They therefore were justly imprisoned in hell for not believing his unbreakable word.

Think about that! The God whom you worship not only conquered death, but was able to walk around in hell itself and make an announcement to the spirits there without any fear of being harmed by them, without any fear of not being able get back out. This is the God who is on your side, the Lord Jesus who has now gone "to heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him." The God who has paid for all your sins and has won eternal life for you, the God who has connected you to the cleansing of Christ's blood and his salvation through baptism, is the same God ruling over the most powerful people and forces in the universe. Even when they appear to have the upper hand, they are only raging and raving underneath Christ's feet. What do we have to fear? What reason do we have not to answer for Christ and Christianity confidently? What can anyone do to us ultimately? The worst they can do, by killing us, is enable us to go safely to the same place Christ is, and then they have to live in this vale of tears with Christ's face against them, unless he graciously converts them, until they die and stand before his judgment throne.

2. What

So we have every reason to answer for Christianity confidently. But what should we answer? Peter puts that pretty simply: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is in you."

How's this for a mission strategy? Pray, "Lord, please have someone ask me the reason for my hope." If you haven't had softballs tossed to you like that, first ask yourself if you've been making it clear that you're actually Christians to the people who could have asked you about your hope. As one of my former members liked to say: If you were indicted for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Have you been repaying evil with evil and insult with insult, or with kindness? Have you been doing nothing but complaining in the face of the growing evil around us, or showing confidence to match your eternal hope? No one is going to ask you the reason for your hope if they can't detect that you have any. Second, have you been praying for softballs to be thrown to you like that?

I have a classmate who is now a pastor who worked at McDonald's during high school. We'll call him Mike, even though that's not his real name. While many of Mike's coworkers went about their work reluctantly and half-heartedly and were essentially trying to do the bare minimum necessary so that they wouldn't get fired and so that they could just get through their shift, punch out, and get back home, Mike did his best to work cheerfully and work hard. He treated his boss with respect. He even would stay late if necessary to make sure his cooking station was nice and clean when he left. Don't get me wrong, Mike wasn't a perfect employee. I remember him telling me once how he told a particularly picky woman at the drive-through menu that if she wanted it her way, she should go to Burger King. But that was the exception, not the rule. One day his boss asked him, "Mike, what makes you tick? Why are you so different from all my other employees?"

What would you tell that man if he asked you that question? "That's just the way I was raised"? "I've always just tried to be a good person and do the right thing"? That would be lying.

There are plenty of people raised the right way, outwardly speaking, who turn out badly because their parents don't pass along any confident hope beyond this life. And we know from the Scriptures that we haven't always just tried to be good people and do the right thing. We're evil people by nature, hostile to God. Without Jesus, if we do good, it's only for our own selfish reasons, for our own glory. The actual reason is the hope that you have in Jesus. So tell people that.

It's not hard. You can start with the words of Peter: "Christ suffered for sins in my place, once and for all, to bring me to God, and he proved it by rising from the dead after he died. In baptism God has saved me and given me the guarantee of a good conscience before him by connecting me to the life and death of Jesus. I know exactly whom I'm living for right now, and I know exactly where I'm going when I die, all thanks to Jesus Christ. That's what makes me tick. That's why I'm different."

That's basically what my friend told his boss. His boss and his family subsequently became members of the church my friend was attending at the time. It turns out other people want to have a higher purpose too. Other people want hope beyond the grave too. You have it. So do I. How can we not answer confidently for it?

If someone asks you about baptism, what it is or why Lutherans baptize babies—and by the way, it was Christians in general who baptized babies for well over fourteen centuries before Martin Luther was even born—Peter gives us a pretty simple and confident answer on that too: "Baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the body but the guarantee of a good conscience before God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

If we are in the Scriptures, listening carefully to our Savior, there are simple, confident answers that we can give for Christianity on a whole host of subjects.

Did any of you watch the Kentucky Derby two Saturdays ago? Did you hear the first words out of the winning jockey's mouth? "First of all, thank you, Lord Jesus Christ, for giving me the opportunity to win the Derby." Not bad. Good for him, for starting the conversation by pointing to Jesus.

Peter is telling us we can do even better. "First of all, thank you, Lord Jesus Christ, for the eternal hope that is in me, the hope of eternal life in your glorious presence through the forgiveness of sins you have won for me." We can answer for Christianity confidently because of the almighty, victorious Lord whose eyes are on us and against our enemies, and we can answer for Christianity confidently by pointing to the eternal hope of heaven that Christ has won for us by his blood.

God help us to do so for Jesus's sake. Amen.