CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN A HOSTILE WORLD

1 Peter 3:13-17

by

Steven J. Cole

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I begin this message with a disclaimer, namely, that I am not qualified to preach it. Before you point your finger and exclaim, “Ha! Then, why are you preaching it?” I also point out that you are not qualified to hear it!

I am an American pastor who lives a reasonably comfortable life by preaching God’s Word. I've never been threatened with imprisonment or torture for my faith. I've never had my property confiscated or my family torn away from me because of my commitment to the gospel. Nor have any of you, to my knowledge, suffered much for your faith in Christ. If I were a Chinese pastor who had served years in a harsh prison for preaching the gospel and you were a Chinese church, whose very presence here this morning represented great risk of persecution, I could preach this text with power and you could hear it well.

But even though we have not paid that kind of price for our faith, we all have faced the fear of witnessing to lost people about the Lord Jesus Christ. I don’t know if it’s the flesh or an inbred fear of conflict or what, but we’ve all felt the churning stomach and sweaty palms that go with the thought, “Uh oh! I need to talk to this person about Jesus Christ! I’m scared! What am I going to do?”

Peter’s theme in our text is Christian witness in a hostile world. His words apply whether we are facing torture for our faith or whether we’re just nervous about the thought of telling someone about Christ. He’s saying,

The best witness in this hostile world combines good behavior with thoughtful words under Christ’s lordship.

Note in your Bible where each aspect of this theme comes from: First, the hostility of the world toward believers—3:13 (“harm
you”); 3:14 (“suffer”; “do not fear their intimidation and do not be troubled”); 3:16 (“slandered”; “revile”); 3:17 (“suffer”).

Second, the best witness combines both good behavior and thoughtful words: Good behavior—3:13 (“zealous for what is good”); 3:14 (“righteousness”); 3:16 (“good conscience”; “good behavior”); 3:17 (“doing good”). Thoughtful words—3:15 (“defense” [Greek = apologia; “account” [Greek = logos]). Both terms refer to verbal witness.

Third, Christ’s lordship—3:15 (“sanctify Christ as Lord”; 3:16 (“good behavior in Christ”); 3:17 (“the will of God”).

These three themes show us, first, the place we are called to witness (a hostile world); second, the practice of our witness (good behavior combined with thoughtful words); and, third, the governing power of our witness (the lordship of Jesus Christ). The section is connected by the word “and” to the quote from Psalm 34 (1 Pet. 3:10-12), where Peter assures us that God will vindicate the righteous and punish the wicked. That’s an important truth to keep in mind as we face hostility or feel intimidated about witnessing. Fearing God above all else will take care of the fear of man and give us the boldness we need to bear effective witness for our Savior.

1. The place where we are called to witness is an often-hostile world.

By quoting Psalm 34, Peter has reminded us that believers are to seek peace, but also that there are in this world those who are righteous and those who are evil. The implication of verse 13 (in the Greek text) is that if we are zealous for what is good, generally speaking, we will not be persecuted. It’s the same principle as Proverbs 16:7, “When a man’s ways are pleasing to the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.” That’s not a promise without exception, but a maxim that generally holds true. An upright life is more peaceful than a wicked life.

But also, Peter may be looking at ultimate harm and ultimate good. Jesus told the twelve (Matt. 10:28), “Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” As Peter points out (3:16, 17), if
we maintain a good conscience when we’re slandered, someday our enemies will be put to shame, either in this life, when our good behavior exposes their lies for what they are, or at the judgment when God calls them to account. Those who do evil will suffer, either here, through civil or divine consequences, or in eternity. Those who do good may suffer here, but they will be vindicated in eternity.

But, because God does not immediately judge the wicked, we may face suffering because of our righteous living. Often sinners feel condemned in the presence of a righteous person, even if the person hasn’t said a word about God, because their sin is exposed and their guilty conscience is confronted by the life of the believer. R. C. Sproul (The Holiness of God [Tyndale], pp. 91-92) tells about a leading professional golfer a few years ago who was invited to play in a foursome with Gerald Ford, Jack Nicklaus, and Billy Graham. He had played with Nicklaus before, but he was in awe of playing with Ford and Graham.

After the round was finished, one of the other pros came up and asked, “Hey, what was it like playing with the President and with Billy Graham?” The pro unleashed a torrent of cursing, and said in a disgusting manner, “I don’t need Billy Graham stuffing religion down my throat.” With that he turned and stormed off, heading for the practice tee.

His friend followed the angry pro and watched him take out his driver and beat ball after ball in fury. The friend said nothing, but just sat on a bench and watched. After a few minutes, the pro had calmed down. His friend said quietly, “Was Billy a little rough on you out there?” The pro heaved an embarrassed sigh and said, “No, he didn’t even mention religion. I just had a bad round.”

On that occasion, Billy Graham didn’t suffer on account of righteousness, although he may have if the angry golfer hadn’t admitted the truth. Peter says that if we do suffer for the sake of righteousness, we are blessed. By “blessed” he doesn’t mean good feelings, but rather the joy that comes from knowing that our lives are pleasing to God. He is reflecting Jesus’ teaching, “Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great,
for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11-12). As 1 Peter 3:17 makes clear, sometimes it is God’s will that we suffer for doing what is right. But, as we’ll see (Point 3 below), Christ is still Lord and we can still trust Him and not fear.

So the first thing we need to recognize is that the world is hostile toward Christ and if we are identified with Christ, there’s always the possibility that the world will be hostile toward us (John 15:18-20). But God has left us here to bear witness of His mercy toward those who are at war with Him. How do we do it faithfully?

2. The practice of our witness combines good behavior with thoughtful words.

Our lives provide the foundation for our lips to speak about the Savior.

A. The practice of our witness involves good behavior.

This theme runs through the whole epistle, including five times in this paragraph (3:13, “good”; 14, “righteousness”; 16, “good conscience;” “good behavior”; 17, “doing good”). Paul often emphasized the same thing (see Titus 2:7, 10, 14; 3:1-2, 8, 14; contrast with Titus 1:16; 3:5). As Christians we are to be zealous for good deeds. It is especially important that we deal rightly with those outside the faith, so that the name of Christ will not be dishonored.

I often hear about Christians and even Christian organizations who are shady in their business dealings with the world. Either they don’t pay their bills on time or they try to cheat or be dishonest or they hassle the person they’re doing business with to the point where the unbeliever says, “I don’t want to deal with this person again!” That’s a bad witness!

Peter says that we need to keep a good conscience (3:16). Our conscience is not an infallible guide, since it can be warped. For example, a new believer may have no qualms about lying or cheating, since his conscience has not yet been shaped by God’s Word. When he was a pagan, everybody lied and cheated, so he brought that over into his Christian life. But as he grows to know God’s Word (and this growth
can happen very rapidly), his conscience becomes informed by that Word. If he acts in obedience, his conscience will begin to check him in things that never bothered him before.

A good conscience is essential for effective witness. If you know that you’re covering sin in your own life instead of confessing and forsaking it, then please keep quiet about your claim to be a Christian. Every time some TV preacher gets caught with a prostitute, the enemies of the Lord mock and blaspheme. It’s also true on a lesser scale at your place of work if people know that you’re a Christian, but see you living an inconsistent life. But if you live obediently to Christ, and when you wrong someone you go to them and make it right, you have a good conscience that makes for powerful witness.

I read (“Our Daily Bread,” [Dec.-Feb., ‘82-‘83]) of a Christian baroness who lived in the highlands of Nairobi, Kenya, who had a young national employed as her houseboy. After three months he asked the baroness to give him a letter of reference to a friendly sheik some miles away. The baroness, not wanting the houseboy to leave just when he had learned the routine of the household, offered to increase his pay.

The boy replied that he was not leaving for higher pay. Rather, he had decided he would become either a Christian or a Muslim. This was why he had come to work for the baroness for three months. He wanted to see how Christians acted. Now he wanted to work for three months for the sheik to observe how Muslims lived. Then he would decide which religion he would follow. The baroness was stunned as she recalled her many shortcomings in dealing with the boy over the past three months. She could only exclaim, “Why didn’t you tell me at the beginning!”

Lost people are watching our behavior, even when we don’t realize it. If we are zealous for what is good, especially when we’re mistreated, it’s a powerful witness. I’m not talking about being sinless, but rather about living obediently to Christ as the bent of your life, and when you sin, confessing it and making it right with those you sinned against. That kind of righteous life is the basis for verbal Christian witness.

B. The practice of our witness involves thoughtful words.
“... always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you” (3:15). The fact that they are asking implies that they have noticed our good behavior. They have seen us bear up with hope and joy, even when we’ve been mistreated. Sooner or later, they’re going to ask, “Why do you live as you do?” Peter says, “Be ready to tell them!”

“Defense” is the Greek word “apologia,” from which we get our words “apology” and “apologetics.” It had the meaning of a prepared legal defense. The word translated “account” is the Greek “logos,” meaning “word.” Both words imply a thoughtful, logical, well-reasoned presentation of the gospel. It’s possible that in the back of his mind, Peter was recalling his own miserable failure on the night Jesus was betrayed, when Peter was taken off guard by a servant girl and ended up denying that he even knew Jesus. If he had just been prepared, he might have done better.

God often uses our failures in witnessing to show us our need to be prepared. During my sophomore year of college, I was in a group discussion class. To get everyone interested so that we would get a better grade, we would pick the most controversial topics we could think of. This was on the front end of the hippie, drug, and free sex movement. There was one guy in our group who invariably took the opposite point of view from me. If we talked about sex outside of marriage, I was against it and he was for it. Homosexuality: I was against it, he was tolerant. Using drugs: I was against it and he had done it.

Finally, one day outside the class, he came up to me and said, “Hey, man, I want to know— are you for real or are you just putting us on in there?” I was a bit taken aback, so I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “You’re so straight. I’ve never seen anybody like that before. I just wondered if you’re really that way or not.” It was a perfect opportunity to share my faith in Christ, but I wasn’t prepared. I didn’t know what to say, so I just mumbled something about, “Yes, I’m really that straight,” but I didn’t tell him about Christ. But God used that failure a few months later to make me respond to the opportunity to get some training in how to share my faith.
The gospel message is simple: You need to tell a person what sin is and what it has done in terms of alienating us from God. They need to know who Christ is and how He bore our sin through His death and resurrection. And they need to know how to accept God’s gift of eternal life and forgiveness through faith. Learn some key verses for each point and you’ve got it. We’re often afraid that someone will ask some thorny question that we can’t answer. You can always say, “I don’t know, but I’ll try to find out.” But there are only about a dozen questions that you’ll ever get asked.

You don’t need to defend the Bible. That’s like defending a lion! Just uncage it and it will take care of itself. The basic problem of every person is the same: He’s a sinner, alienated from God. Every person needs the same thing: Forgiveness of sins and new life in Jesus Christ. People often raise objections and questions to divert you from their sin because they don’t want to face it. Often I will ask a person, “If I can resolve this question, will you commit yourself to Jesus Christ?” Or, I’ll say, “If you will read the Bible and tell God, ‘If You show me that this is true, I’ll obey it,’ then He will show you.” Invariably a person’s resistance isn’t due to intellectual reasons, but due to moral reasons.

We need to be careful to avoid arguing. We can win the argument and lose the person. That’s not what Peter means by making a defense. He means that we should calmly present the truth in a clear manner. He adds that we must do it with gentleness and reverence. Gentleness isn’t weakness or lack of boldness. Rather, it means strength under control. Reverence refers to fearing God more than men. We can speak confidently because we fear God and His opinion above any human opinion. As we share the gospel kindly, without quarreling, we should silently be asking God to grant repentance and bring the person to the knowledge of the truth (2 Tim. 2:24-25).

The place where we are called to witness is an often-hostile world. The practice of our witness combines good behavior with thoughtful words.

3. **The governing power in our witness is the Lord Jesus Christ.**
“Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts” (3:15). (The KJV and New KJV are based on a weaker text, “Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts.” “Christ” is clearly the original.) To sanctify means to make holy or set apart. It’s the same word used in the Lord’s Prayer, when Jesus said, “Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name.” To hallow God’s name means to set it apart as holy, to reverence God above all others.

To understand this verse, we must realize that Peter is quoting from Isaiah 8:12-13. In that context, faithless King Ahaz of Judah had allied himself with Assyria to stave off an invasion from Israel and Syria. Isaiah and the faithful remnant were being charged with conspiracy because they opposed this godless alliance. The Lord is encouraging them not to fear the Assyrians nor those in Judah who were charging them with conspiracy, but rather, they were to fear the Lord of hosts and regard Him as holy (“sanctify” Him).

The significant thing is that Peter changes “the Lord of hosts” into the “Lord Christ,” thus showing that he believed Jesus Christ to be one and the same as the Lord of hosts in Isaiah. He is telling us to fear Christ as God above anyone who threatens to harm us because of our witness. Because Jesus Christ is the Lord of hosts, over all rule and authority, we can trust Him to triumph ultimately, no matter what sufferings we may have to endure for His sake (see Matt. 11:2-6).

We need to remember that if they persecuted and killed Jesus in His first coming, they may do the same to us. But we are called to bear witness, even in the face of hostility, through our good behavior and thoughtful words, in submission to His lordship, knowing that He will return in power and glory to crush all opposition and reign in righteousness.

**Conclusion**

In his book, *Everyday Evangelism* (IVP, pp. 21-22), Tom Eisenman tells a moving story that shows that we all can be effective witnesses in this hostile world if we will combine good deeds with verbal witness in submission to Christ’s lordship. David, a ninth grade boy in their youth program, was big for his age and very tough, but he had a heart for Jesus. In school he was making a coffee table for his mother as
a Christmas gift. He finished it a few days before Christmas and left it in the shop so he wouldn't have to take it home and hide it. On the last day of school before vacation David went to pick up his table. He was shocked to find that someone had stolen it.

David had a lot of friends. It didn’t take him long to find out who took his table. It was a younger boy who was unpopular and frail. David easily could have beat him up. Instead, he spent his entire Christmas vacation in the shop at school making a duplicate table. When he had it finished, he went to the other boy's house. When the younger boy opened the door and saw David standing there, he was petrified. David just said, “I have something I’d like to give you and your family for Christmas.” He handed him the new table.

The younger boy burst into tears. He went into the house and came back with David’s first table. The boys talked. The younger boy asked forgiveness, and David granted it. Within a few weeks the younger boy was attending the youth program at the church and eventually he became a Christian.

Would you examine your own life? Are you zealous for good deeds, even when you’re mistreated? Are you able to give a gentle defense of the gospel? Do you fear the Lord Christ above everyone else? If not, make the necessary adjustments. Then God will use you mightily as His witness in this hostile world.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What is your biggest fear about witnessing? Your biggest hindrance?
2. How “together” must one’s life be before he bears witness for Christ?
3. How aggressive should we be in sharing our faith?
4. Is every Christian called to bear verbal witness or only those with the gift of evangelism?

Two good books on witnessing: *Concentric Circles of Concern* [Broadman Press], by W. Oscar Thompson, Jr., and *How to Give Away Your Faith* [IVP], by Paul Little.

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