

1 Peter: Introduction & Holiness

I want to introduce you to 1 Peter first. The apostle Peter wrote the Book of Peter. If you had never read the New Testament, but you just heard all the Gospel stories, if you got done with the idea that Jesus is the central character, who else would you say are the really important characters in the Gospel stories? Peter, James and John—those are really big. Pharisees are pretty important as a group. So if Peter is going to write a book, what kind of a book would you expect him to write? You would expect to give us a Gospel, and long-standing church tradition from the earliest times tells us that Peter was the source of Mark's Gospel. Mark wrote down the things that Peter told him as he recalled the events of Christ's life, but Peter did not write a Gospel. What did he write? 1 Peter is not really what you would expect the apostle Peter to write, is it? It does not seem to fit at first, but then again, perhaps this great spokesman and eyewitness of the apostles and of the ministry of Christ is giving us something that we should expect. Turn to the last thing from the Gospels that Peter did, in John 21. I think it may shed little light on the book of 1 Peter. This comes from that period after the resurrection, in the last chapter of John. After the resurrection but before Jesus ascended into heaven, there was a period of some weeks, seven weeks more or less, in which Jesus occasionally appeared to the apostles. At other times during this period, they seem to have been waiting around, not quite knowing what to do. John 21 is one of those occasions. I don't know exactly what was going on, but Peter says, "I'm going fishing," as if he has not seen Jesus appear lately and does not know what to study or prepare for right now, so he says, "Let's go fishing—that is something we know how to do." So he goes fishing and they are fishing at night, which was the custom. The Lord comes to them at night and helps them catch some fish and talks to the disciples afterwards. John 21:15 says this, "When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?'" When it says, "these," it could mean "these other men" or it could mean "these things," like the fishing implements. The text does not really specify this. Peter is somewhat humble this time. He does not say, "Yes, I love You more than these." Remember that he just denied Christ not too many days earlier, and so he does not say, "I love You more," but more humbly, he simply says "Yes, Lord, You know that I love You." The text goes on in verses 16 and following:

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said to him, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

There is more to it than that. This little interaction between Jesus and Peter has been discussed many times. Perhaps some of you have heard messages or lessons on this passage. Sometimes people stress the idea that Jesus sort of forces Peter to confess three times, because Peter denied Him three times, suggesting that Jesus was giving a kind of rebuke through a series of rhetorical questions. Some of you probably have heard that Jesus uses different words here for "love," as if he were asking the first two times whether Peter really loved him—*agapao*—with the pure, excellent, God-like love, and then the third time, as if He was really doubting Peter's sincerity, He says *phileo*, the love of friendship or affection. It is true that the words change—first *agapao*, then *phileo*—but I really do not think that is the main point. I think the main point is this: Jesus knows that Peter denied Him three times, and although it hurts to be asked three times, what Jesus is also doing is giving him a chance to confess three times. Three denials, three confessions: "You know that I love You; You know it; You know it." Jesus gives three reinstatements, because every time that Peter denied Christ, any one of those denials by itself would be enough to bar him forever from his role as an apostle, but instead Jesus tells him three times over, we could almost say, "I reinstate you, I reinstate you, I reinstate you." He says, "Feed My lambs,

take care of My sheep, feed My sheep,” three times over and I believe that is what 1 Peter is. It is not a Gospel, but it is a feeding and caring for the sheep of God in a time of persecution and challenge to the Christian faith. It is not a Gospel, but it is a book that is most needful in a time of impending persecution. That is sort of a basic view of the matter.

Peter is an apostle. He writes as an eyewitness to the faith. Again, we might have expected more, but this is what we have. The language of 1 Peter indicates that he has been in heavy contact with his fellow disciples and with the teachings of Jesus. The language of Peter—and this sometimes confuses people—is similar to the language of Paul, especially in books like Ephesians. In some ways, the language of Peter is also similar to the language that we find in Hebrews. I have a chart for you in which 1 Peter 3:3-7—with its comments on the way women should conduct themselves and dress and treat their husbands—is compared with Ephesians 5, 1 Corinthians 14, and 1 Timothy 2. I am not going to go through that with you in depth, but you can see that not only are the concerns similar, but the language is similar, as well. These passages contain a lot of the same words as well as the same concepts. They establish their teaching the same way: by grounding it in the prior work of Christ. Not only here, but on many other occasions, the language of Peter and Paul is similar. Critics say that the reason that Peter is similar in its approach and its language to Paul, is because it was not really written by Peter, but rather by somebody who wanted to give the idea that Peter and Paul were in deep agreement about things. These critics say that the ideas in 1 Peter are not indeed Peter’s own, but the ideas that someone put in the mouth of Peter in order to give an impression of healing in the rift between Peter and Paul—Peter having a more Jewish Gospel, Paul a more Gentile-oriented Gospel. The critics suggest that this rift existed and that it was never really healed, but someone wanted to create the impression, by putting words in Peter’s mouth, that Peter and Paul were united even though they really were not. I think, first of all, that there is no evidence for such a rift between them, except what we have in that one place in Galatians 2 where Paul rebukes Peter, but by Acts 15, they are all in agreement and things are taken care of. I think it is much easier to say that there is a simpler more logical explanation, which is that all the apostles saw the same things. They were members of the same group. They spent time with each other. They agreed as to what the Gospel was. They were members of the same team and like any group that has the same vision, like any members of the same team, they are going to start talking in similar ways. That would apply to a sports team, a military team, a team at work, or even people around your house. You, your children, your parents, those with whom you spend a lot of time just start talking similarly. That is natural when people agree about things. So we do not need to go through a stretch for that.

You can look at an outline of 1 Peter on your own, but I will operate thematically here. I am going to call to your attention to three themes that more or less coincide with the movement through the book. The first theme is “Holiness as the mark of a Christian,” from chapter 1 around verse 13 to chapter 2, maybe verse 3 or maybe verse 10. The second theme is “Social relations within the church,” and the third is, “Solutions to the problem of persecution,” from the latter half of chapter 3 and all of chapter 4. Persecution does not take up all of 1 Peter, but Peter does have his eye on it all the time. He has his eye on the difficulty of living in this world as a Christian. As a result, that interest in living a difficult life in this world as a Christian appears first and last in the book. If you notice, in chapter 1:3-11, he praises God for the secure hope that God’s elect have, even though they suffer trials now for a little while. He puts suffering in the context of doxology, “praise to God,” with which the book opens, and a statement of confidence that God will take us through to the end, a statement of confidence and joy. At the end of the book, in chapter 5:12, “I write encouraging and testifying to you that this is the true grace of God in which you stand.” Even while Satan prowls and while persecution looms, you can stand. The book begins and ends with promises that despite the difficulties in life, you will stand. It is not always easy to stand then or now, and that is a brief introduction to 1 Peter.

Let us return now to 1 Peter 1. Peter opens with a section in which he praises God. He says in 1 Peter 1:3-5,

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you who through faith are kept [the NIV says “shielded,” but it is actually a different word for “kept” again] kept in heaven for you who through faith are kept by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Peter’s overture to his faithful people is this: You are God’s elect. You are called to a living hope. You are strangers and exiles in this world, chapter 1:1 says. Difficulties are going to come your way, but there is a reward, an inheritance kept for you, verse 3, even while God is keeping you for it. It is kept for you and you are kept for it, so that, come what may (and a lot may come!), he begins with this guarantee of God’s sovereign provision. He immediately tells us why. He begins with that idea of God keeping and so forth. Verse 6 says, “In this you greatly rejoice,”—in this idea of a reward kept for you—“though now, for a little while, you may have had to suffer grief and all kinds of trials.” I want to point out that “a little while,” is a euphemism. What he means by this is “a little while compared to eternity.” “A little while,” can mean a fairly long time in New Testament language, as for example in Revelation, where 10 days can mean your whole life. Suffering for a little while may mean you suffer even to the point of death, but it is a little while compared to eternity. He gives the clue about how hard things can get with that phrase, “while you suffer in all kinds of trials.” Again, his first point and his last point in the book will be very similar. He is going to say in chapter 5:12, “I write you to encourage you that this is the true grace of God in which you stand.” Now “this is the grace of God in which you stand,” could mean that the whole book is about the grace of God that allows you to stand, or it could be referring to the last part of the book, meaning that God’s grace which allows you to stand is the ability to resist Satan who prowls like a roaring lion. I do not know which one it is, but I do know this: the book begins and ends with a reference to God keeping us safe even in the midst of persecution. That is the overarching idea, but Peter is not only interested in persecution. He is also interested in how we live our lives in the face of this, in this difficult age that is ours, and he is going to stress three things: Christian holiness in this age apart from persecution, proper social conduct in the life of Christians in Christian society, and the proper response to the coming persecution. Let us take a look at the first one, Christian holiness.

This section begins with the call to holiness in verse 13. Actually, the call proper begins with the notion that we should be self-controlled. Be holy; first of all, be self-controlled. In verse 14, he says we should be holy as obedient children. He says, “Do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. Do not conform yourselves through evil desires,” and here is why. This is a little theme we are going to have, which is that we do not really belong to this world and its desires anyway. Chapter 1:1 is addressed to God’s elect strangers or exiles in the world. Chapter 1:14, “As obedient children do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.” Continuing in verse 17, we read, “Since you call on a God who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives here as strangers in reverent fear.” Chapter 2:11 says, “Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in this world to abstain from sinful desires which wage war against your soul.”

How many of you know the song, “This World is Not My Home, I’m Just A-Passin’ Through”? How many of you think there is something kind of questionable about that song? The song itself does not matter; it is just that little phrase—“This world is not my home, I’m just a-passin’ through.” There is something a little odd about that song. Is that a good view of the world? Isn’t it true that taking a Reformed view on life means you say that God has an interest in restoring His creation? It is all His. He

created the world and He fashioned it. Isn't it true that we should try to redeem all creation because God in Christ is restoring all things and reconciling all things to Himself? Is the song beginning to sound incorrect yet? I was taught this song as a boy, and I was taught as a college student at a good Reformed college that this is a bad song, because it is world-denying and we have to affirm the world, that all creation is God's. How many of you have heard a scenario of Christ's relation to culture? Richard Niebuhr talked about five different ways for Christians and for Christ to relate to the culture, but one of them is "Christ against culture," which is the idea that it is the responsibility of Christians to oppose the worldliness of this age. "Christ fulfills culture," is another one. The idea here would be that various cultures can take us a long distance toward true righteousness and true holiness or towards wisdom or things that help people (like medicine, cars, etc.), but to really make something of it we have to press on beyond that. With "Christ of culture," the idea is that whatever is good in any culture comes from the Spirit of Christ dwelling in it; the natural gifts of humanity are getting their origin or source from Christ. "Christ transforms culture" means that it is the responsibility of Christians to change the world for the Lord, to get in there and get involved in politics and social action and see if we can bring more of the will of God and more of the reign of Christ to bear on the world.

I am going to tell you that in the circles that give the largest number of students to this seminary, this is the main view—"Christ transforms culture." This is considered to be the Calvinistic view. Here is a little church history: John Calvin is looked upon as the originator of a soteriology, a doctrine of salvation, that has its focus on God's sovereign working. "Salvation is of the Lord"—that is Calvinist. But that is not all Calvin did. He also looked at refugees coming into the city and started things like a silk industry and other textile industries. He tried to close down taverns where there was a lot of drunkenness and gambling. He was interested in social reform and in providing decent jobs for people, so Calvin is considered to be one who has the view "Christ transforms culture." Today, whether you have heard of these labels or not, it is certainly true that a lot of Christians are advocating that evangelicals should stop their withdrawal from the world and stop giving up on the world. We hear people saying that 60 or 70 million evangelicals should be making a greater impact on the United States. There is a lot of truth to that ideal, but I want to urge upon you something else: Peter says that Christians are strangers, exiles, and aliens in this world.

American culture has been so much influenced by Christianity. Although we are a long way from being a Christian nation, our society contains much Christian influence—even things as simple as the idea that when an ambulance is behind you, you should pull over and let it pass. Not every nation on earth holds the high view of human life that is borne out in a little thing like that. In our society, it is a given that when an ambulance is coming, no matter what is going on, you must pull over; somebody could possibly be dying. That is an influence of Christianity in our culture. Not every culture has the concept that you pull over for an ambulance. There are many Christian influences, and furthermore, there are many Christians in this world, but we have to hear what Peter has to say, and what he has to say to us is, "There is a sense in which we really do not belong here."

The old song "This World is Not My Home" has a lot of truth in it. We are kind of passing through. Yes, it is true that the Lord will restore the heavens and the earth and He will give us resurrection bodies. If the song would lead us away from those principles that Jesus cares about our bodies and is going to restore and purify all the creation and do His will in the new heavens and the new earth, if an emphasis on alienation would wipe that out, then we would have a problem, but we do need to realize that there is a sense in which we will never fit here. We need to realize that Christians will always seem kind of strange to a lot of people, and that no matter how nice you are, or how logical your explanations of what you are doing are, some people will look at you and say, "You are crazy! What is wrong with you to believe that stuff?" Peter will get into that a little more, but we need to receive from him this testimony

that holiness is sometimes radically nonsensical to the world around us. The easiest example would be sexual mores—“What is wrong with you Christians that you will not have a little fun? It is just recreational sex; why not have some fun? Why deprive yourselves, you Puritan fun-haters? Why not go out and just get drunk once in a while, drink your cares away? What is wrong with you?” The world does not understand and we will never be comfortable, we will never just fit in, and we really should not want to, Peter says.

So the first point is that you should be holy because you should no longer live for your evil desires because you do not really belong in this world with its desires. Second, Peter tells us in verses 14-16 that God says, “Be holy, because I am holy.” God calls us to be holy to be like Him.

Third, we should be holy because we are redeemed from our former empty way of life by the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God, whose blood is more precious than silver or gold. We have been redeemed.

Fourth, we should live holy lives because holiness minimizes suffering in this life. It allows us to live the best possible life that we can. So holiness means then those four things. If we could just define holiness for a moment, it means that we should be set apart from the world. We reject our evil desires, the empty way of life individually. We are also going to see that there is a social component to holiness. Christians shun the sins that mar a Christian community. They do not only care about their own holiness, they are also zealous for the holiness of their community. Part of that is, while we are trying to influence this world—“Christ transforms culture,” and that really should happen; sixty million evangelicals should have more impact than they do, and we should wonder what is wrong—we also recognize that there is a sense in which Christians are basically against the mainstream of almost every culture that has ever existed.

1 Peter is not a very optimistic or very evangelistic book. Peter has this sense that we are separate from the world. The world thinks that we are strange, and the best way to change the world is sometimes by simply saying, “No,” to the world. One scholar has said that the more the church has sensed its alienation from the world, the more it has been able to influence the world. There is a lot of wisdom in that. The way to change the world is not by being the world’s friend, because that will not happen unless you go over to their side. Recognize how different you are.

We are going to stress the lordship of Christ over all things, but sometimes the lordship of Christ over all things means rejection of many things. This has its impact on the possibility of evangelism. When Christians live well, the world does not always understand why. In this seminary, we rightly talk about apologetics and outreach and evangelism and things like that and we rightly look for opportunities to testify to our faith wherever we are. James and the letters of Paul should give us the impression that we should expect good results, but 1 Peter 2:11-12 suggests that no matter how good a life you may live, no matter how brightly your light shines, the pagans may not ever get the point. “Dear friends,” he says, “I urge you as aliens and strangers in this world to abstain from sinful desires which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that...” Sometimes you are led to believe that Peter would finish it off by saying “the pagans will want to know why you live so well,” or “they will ask you how it is that you are such a wonderful person and so altruistic and kind and loving and sacrificial.” The idea we often get is that you live such a good life that people will want to know why that light burns inside you. That is true sometimes, but sometimes, Peter says, you will live such good lives that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us. The day He visits us is the judgment day. What this means is that you will live beautiful lives and the pagans will say, “I accuse, I accuse, I accuse” and the only time they will finally stop accusing you is when Christ returns. Then they will have to admit that they were wrong to accuse you; it will never happen in

this life. I am not urging you to despair of evangelism, but this is part of the biblical testimony. We are that strange to the world at times.

He goes on to tell us, in chapter 3:15-16, some things about the hope that we should have as Christians. Here is another very well-known verse that I do not think we always get quite right. He says, “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.” He is talking about not being received well here. “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have, but do it 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.” Peter does not say, “Live such a good life and give such a good answer that they will become Christians.” He says, “Live so well, and answer so gently that they will be ashamed of their slander.” They will still slander, but they will feel bad about it. That is the hope that Peter lays out here.

I could go back and talk about this even line-by-line. “Be prepared to give an answer.” That little word “give an answer” is a Greek word *apologia*, from which we get our word “apologetics.” We sometimes link apologetics with giving a reason for the faith and we link apologetics with outreach and evangelism, even in our curriculum, and again, I want to make it absolutely clear I am not against that. I am all in favor of that, and I think what is taught in that course is wonderful, but what he is saying here is that the answer that you give is actually this word *apologia*. This is actually a word from the court system, and the idea is that you have been hauled in front of the court to give a defense for yourself. Even this little word, “ask,” which seems so innocuous in English and can be in the Greek—“be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks”—that word for ask, *aiteo*, on a number of occasions can mean “ask” in the sense of interrogation, asking in the courtroom. Putting this together with *apologia*, which is definitely a legal term, we begin to get the idea of this passage a little more fully. Be prepared to give a defense to everyone who demands it of you. Be prepared to give the reason, and even the word there is sort of an accounting, as if you have to render an account. When it is all done, when you have given that reason, then the result again will be not that they will say, “Oh, goodness, we are sorry that we charged you. We are sorry that we thought ill of you.” The result will be that they will keep on slandering you, but they will feel bad about it. That is about as good as it gets sometimes.

There is another passage along these lines. It is chapter 4:1-4: “Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourself with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires but rather for the will of God.” This is the imitation of Christ motif. He was willing to suffer, and you should be too. He did not live His life for human desires. He lived it for the will of God, and you should too. That is just implied there. Peter’s main audience was Gentiles and pagans. He says, “You spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do: living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.” Those are the sins of rank paganism—sensuality, drunkenness and idolatry. Verse 4 tells us, “They think it is strange that you do not plunge with them in the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.” How many of you know exactly what this is talking about? How many of you are adult converts to the Christian faith and you now see your friends from high school or your friends from college or your early adult years and they say, “What happened to you?” They thought you were crazy. They said, “Come on, let’s go do drugs, let’s go get drunk. What is wrong with you? Why don’t you want to have any fun anymore? Don’t you like us anymore? You think you’re better than us, don’t you?” They are not pleased that you have gotten your life in order. They think you are strange, and more than that, Peter says, they heap abuse on you: “Self-righteous, holier-than-thou, you Christian! Don’t you know what you’re giving up?” That is what happens sometimes. Of course, it often works the other way, because maybe your friend was searching too.

I became a Christian when I was a freshman in college, and my best friend from high school and I were converted the same week. We wrote each other letters that crossed in the mail. The day after I sent my letter, I got a letter from him, not responding to my letter, but he had become a believer, too. And that is great and wonderful. In fact, four or five of my high school friends became believers in the six months after we graduated as young, existential, crypto-nihilists or something. We thought we were very cool, and we were doing our best to hide our despair, and the Lord reached us. That does happen a lot of times, and we got together one year after we graduated and we shared our newfound joy, but it is also true that sometimes they simply abuse you and do not understand. That is what happens. That is part of Peter's testimony as to what it means to be a Christian. It means to be thought of as strange and to be abused for it. That should not stop us. We should still do good.

I have a little word in the outline, a word family that appears a dozen times, *agathopoieo* and *agathopoiia* which mean "to do good" and "good deeds." Those words appear 12 times in the New Testament, and six of them come from Peter. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2:15 that by doing good we can silence foolish men. The book is not always pessimistic. Here is one that is hopeful: in chapter 3:6, he says that a Christian wife can win her husband (that is the one place he really gives some solid hope) by doing good and being an excellent wife. Three times Peter says it is imperative for a Christian to do good, even in the face of suffering, even while being abused just for being a Christian, in fact: 2:20, 3:17, and 4:19. He does just barely hint a couple of times that by doing good we can frustrate the hostility of some of our adversaries, who will admit that they are judging or harming us unjustly. 1 Peter contains a call to holiness, such a unique call that we might say Peter is an austere book. It does not say, "Do things right and you can count on some results." It says, "Do things right and you may get no results, but entrust yourself to God and He will take care of things for you." Even if taking care of things for you means only comforting you after your death, even if it only means that your vindication, the end of the slander, is at the end of this age, entrust yourself to Him. He will keep you for it.