

1 Peter: Corporate Holiness & Persecution

We have talked about the first main theme of the book of 1 Peter so far, the theme of holiness. The second theme of Peter is the life of the Christian community, which of course will overlap with the theme of holiness, because if we are holy individually, then we should be holy corporately as well. The discussion starts in chapter 2:1-2. As one scholar has put it, if you look at the call to holiness that comes to Christians, it is easy to see how different it is from the pagan vices that were being discussed at the beginning. 1 Peter 4 says, “You used to live in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and idolatry.” Those are the pagan vices. Look at what a Christian is supposed to put off: “Rid yourselves therefore,” says 1 Peter 2:1, “of all malice and deceit, hypocrisy and envy and slander of every kind.” These are not the gross vices of paganism, but they are community-destroying vices, things that are so often tolerated even in the church. Notice the twin vices of deceit and slander, which are both sins of speech or sins of the mouth. Deceit is practiced to someone’s face. Slander is practiced behind someone’s back, but they are both sins of dishonesty. Slander is judging another when you have no right to do so, telling tales about somebody where you have no right to do that. Deceit is the sin of pretending all is well, but manipulating. I will tell you that I could not agree more with Proverbs which says, “Better is an open rebuke than hidden love.” There is very little that will destroy the church faster than tricking each other to our faces and telling tales about each other behind our backs. People will get mad at you occasionally for telling the truth to their faces, but if you do it privately and lovingly and prayerfully and out of a relationship, most of the time people will thank you for telling them difficult truths directly. I cannot remember the last time somebody got angry with me for telling them the truth. I do know when I have been ashamed of not telling the truth because I was afraid of what would happen, and I do know that I have seen a lot of people who have become very angry when people would not tell them the truth and they hid what was truly in their hearts and did not reveal it. So the Christian community has to get rid of dishonest statements with the mouth, statements of malice and deceit. We are built up as a community through truth-telling.

Peter goes on to describe the Christian community in verses 4 to 8. Just look down the page and see how many Old Testament quotations there are in this passage. We have quotations from Isaiah—Isaiah 40, Isaiah 28, Isaiah 53, Isaiah 8—and also Psalm 118 and 34. They are all found in this passage. There is something strange about that—can you appreciate this? Who is Peter writing to primarily? He is writing primarily to Gentiles, and as he talks about their Christian community, he is quoting to them the Old Testament Scripture. The way he does it is by acting as if they should know this, but they are Christians; they do not have the Old Testament. They are Gentiles. They are pagans. Why is he doing that? Because he is assuming that they had better know. Luke, Paul, John, Mark, all the authors of the New Testament, writing to pagans and Gentiles, quote and allude to the Old Testament over and over again, because they want the Gentile Christians to believe this is their testimony. This is their Gospel. This is the truth for their community. These people are scattered throughout the world, they come from an empty way of life, they committed pagan sins, but the Old Testament truth is theirs. And not only is it theirs, but even as we look line-by-line, what we notice is that the statements that are made about the Christian community are not just quotations from the Old Testament, but descriptions of the family of the faith from the Old Testament. Look at chapter 2, verses 4 through about 8 or 9. “As you come to him, the living stone,”—that is Jesus—“rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him, you also, like living stones are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” The first reference is, “you come to Him as a living stone.” Jesus is called the living stone, rejected by men. The picture is this: people are trying to build a building. As they try to build their building, they have a group of stones, and they are looking for a capstone or a cornerstone. They have a lot of stones they can choose from to see which one may be the right one, and they look through the pile and they are rejecting them one by one. When they come to the stone, Jesus,

they look it over and they scrutinize Jesus and they say, “No, he is not the one.” They rejected Him; the builders rejected the cornerstone. He is the living stone because as it says in verse 7, “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,” the cornerstone, and He has become, verse 8, “a stone that causes men to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.” Before we get there, Peter says, “Listen, you are like Him. You are living stones, too. He is the living stone, and you are living stones being built into a spiritual house, into a holy priesthood.” Do you know where the phrase “holy priesthood” comes from? Israel as a nation is called a holy priesthood. Now the Christian community is called a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices, and a little later, in verse 9, we read, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God,” which is a quotation from Exodus 19.

As God prepares to constitute the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai, as they are ready to receive the law of the covenant and to seal the covenant with a sacrifice, he says these words, Exodus 19:4: “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you fully obey me and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations, you will be my treasured possession; you will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to say to Israel.” The statements that God made to Israel about her identity are now statements applied not just to the church, but to the Gentile church, the pagan church. What he is saying is this: the identity that you used to have as a pagan is now gone. Your friends think you are strange. Your friends heap abuse upon you, and furthermore, there is even persecution coming your way, so you need a new community. What new community will that be? It is not just going to be a band of Christians together. You are not in community by yourself. You are now “engrafted,” to use the language of Paul, into another community, the community of Israel. Your roots are no longer in paganism and false gods. Your roots are now the roots of Israel. All that God did for Israel, all that He made Israel, He is now making you. You are His new community, His new household of the faith. The church is a spiritual house that replaces the physical temple. The house of God is no longer in one place like the physical temple was. Before, if you wanted to go meet with God and be part of God’s house, you had to go to Jerusalem. Now it is a spiritual house.

The Christians are now a nation scattered throughout the nations. There is no Christian nation anymore. The question, “Is America a Christian nation?” is a bad question. The answer is no, but I wish you would not even ask, because the only nation of God is that new nation constituted under Christ—His house, His dwelling, His family that is scattered throughout every nation. We are a nation without boundaries. We offer spiritual sacrifices now. What is that spiritual sacrifice? 1 Samuel says, “To obey is better than sacrifice.” David says in Psalm 51 that the sacrifices of God are a contrite heart. Isaiah says, “May my prayer be like the evening sacrifice,” and God even says about the Israelites’ false sacrifice, “I have more than enough of sacrifices.” The temple is now spiritual. We are a temple made without hands. Our lives are an ongoing sacrifice, so that we might say that the Christian faith is a deeply decentralized faith. It is one scattered throughout the nations. The builders examined this and they threw it away. They said, “We reject it,” but God is building it into a new nation. The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone, and now people are stumbling over that stone. If they reject that stone, they will fall over it. Christians are now the royal priesthood, the chosen nation, the people of God. That is who we are.

Immediately following this description of our new creation as a new nation before God, he says again—this is 1 Peter 2:11—“I urge you as aliens and strangers in the world to abstain from sinful desires.” One of the reasons why he stresses that we are aliens in this world is because he wants to stress the Christian community. That is where our identity is, not in this world. If that is true, it means your identity does not come from your place of origin. There are places in which the town from which you came is everything, or places in which the high school you attended is very important. There are places in which the college

you attended establishes your rank. There are places in which the job you have or the color of your skin or the language you speak or the way you speak the language other people speak or the way you dress, those all establish your identity, but that is not true anymore. Your identity comes not from race, not from ethnicity, not from language, not from social barriers. They have been broken down. Our fundamental allegiance is to this new family. We are aliens and strangers in this world. No matter where we were born, where we went to high school or college, we do not really belong there. We really belong in this new nation, the true Israel, the nation of God. That is the principle of Christian community that he is describing here. This kind of teaching makes me very uncomfortable with homogenous church growth principles—the idea that to really plant a good church, everyone needs to come from the same social strata. It is easy to stress things like where you came from and your skin color or racial background, but in America there is a great deal of prejudice based on education and the amount of money you have, and race is not the only factor. Race is important, but race is not the only factor. The church builds all kinds of barriers that separate people from people, and we must consider all of them, not just the ones that are obvious or safe to talk about right now in our culture. Obviously, what is safe to talk about changes from decade to decade. What is safe to talk about now might have been very dangerous 30 years ago. It could be dangerous 30 years in the future. We establish all kinds of barriers, but again, our true identity is not in race, ethnicity, language, education, amount of money, or where we live. Our true identity is in Christ. That is what it means to be a Christian: to be in this new community and to be alienated from another one.

The third main theme in 1 Peter is the persecution theme. It began early on in the book, but it does not come up very often in the first couple of chapters. We noticed already in chapter 1:6, “You may have to suffer a little while in various trials.” In chapter 2:19-20, it suggests that you may, if you are a slave, get beaten up just for being a Christian. Chapter 2:18-20 says, “Slaves, submit to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also those who are harsh. It is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God,” possibly meaning “because he is a Christian.” We will talk a little later about the danger of suffering because you are a Christian; chapter 4:14 makes that explicit. Peter says if you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed.

In the first three chapters, the idea of suffering comes up once in awhile, but most of the time the assumption in these chapters is that you can live a fairly normal life in this world as a Christian. The apex of that idea of “live well and things should go right,” is found in chapter 3:8, especially chapter 3:10. He says there, quoting Psalm 34, which is one of the wisdom psalms that tell us how to live a good life, what the contours of good life are. He says, “For whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech.” The first thing you want to do if you want to have a good life is not to mouth off, not to lie, not to insult people. Control your tongue—that is where most of our problems come from. If you want to have a good life, the first thing you do is control your tongue. Verse 11 says that you must turn from evil and do good. If you do good, people will be good to you. You must seek peace and pursue it. Do not get in any fights, because the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil. So if you want a good life, take care of that and realize God will be on your side, control your speech, do good, do not get into fights, pursue peace, and things will be basically all right. That makes sense. If people did that, things should go pretty well.

He goes on to say in verse 13, “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?” What is he anticipating? The answer is, “no one.” No one will trouble you if you are a good person. But now the switch begins, because in these few verses, although he held out this hope, now he does not say “no one,” in verse 14. He says something quite different. He says, “But even if you should suffer for what is

right, you are blessed.” I want to talk about grammar for a moment. The Greek language has four moods. Here they are: the indicative is the mood of reality, like, “It has finally stopped raining. The sun is shining.” That is indicative, expressing something real, because we have had some sunshine after a lot of rain lately. The imperative is the mode of commanding. We do not usually command the weather, but we might say “It’s raining; take your umbrella.” The mood of the imperative is, “I want you to make something real. The real thing is that you should carry your umbrella and I am telling you to make it real.” The third mood is the mood of the subjunctive, which refers to things that may very well happen, things that are very plausible. For example, “If it rains, if it should rain tomorrow, I am sure that I will get wet, because I have lost my umbrella.” If there is a 50/50 chance of rain, you would be using the subjunctive because it may very well rain. There is rain in the forecast for tomorrow, but it is not certain because you are not sure that it will rain tomorrow. There is one more, and it is the one we very rarely use in English. It is called the optative, and it is the mood of remote possibilities. This would be in the Sahara Desert and you would say, “Oh, that it would rain and the desert would bloom!” The desert is not going to bloom. We are in the Sahara, or Death Valley, the driest places on earth. You say, “Oh, that it would rain!” It is a remote possibility. Perhaps it will rain once or twice this year. The mood used here in verse 14 is the optative: “Who is going to harm you if you do what is good, but even if it is barely remotely possible,” he says, “that you will suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed.” So he first introduces suffering as a remote possibility, but he will move on from there.

In 1 Peter 3:14, he says “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.” In Greek, there are two ways to give a negative command. One way means, “Stop what you are already doing.” They have an easy way of conveying that, called a present imperative. They have another way of conveying, “Don’t even start. I know you are not doing it now; don’t start.” That is done with what is called an aorist subjunctive, a negative aorist subjunctive. This one—“Don’t fear what they fear”—is the one that means “Don’t even start.” It is as if Peter is saying, “I know you are not afraid right now, and I don’t want you to start to become afraid.” Again, the idea is that this fear of persecution and mistreatment is a little ways off, but he is being gentle with them, because it is not very far off. He is kind of easing them into the subject, because in verse 15, he speaks in the indicative, the mood of reality. Suddenly what was far away is getting closer. He says, “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks a reason, or accounting, of the faith you have in you. Do it with respect, keeping a clear conscience ... so they will be ashamed of their slander.” That is all indicative, as if this is very close, and the advice that he gives certainly makes a great deal of sense to those who are getting close to fears.

Notice what he does here in verse 14. He says, “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.” What are the most common fears of pagan people? They are afraid of death, rejection, failure, sickness, unemployment, poverty, loneliness, being exposed, insignificance, the unknown, having the truth come out about them. There are others. What is the one we are talking about here, related to this? Being robbed, beaten up, going to jail, being killed, and things of that nature. What Peter says is: “Make your list; don’t fear what they fear. You know what their fears are; don’t have those fears.” He is speaking in absolute language. There is a sense in which some fears can be good. For example, fear of loneliness can drive us to do things so we won’t be lonely, like make friends. However, that is not his main point. What he means is, “Don’t be terrified by the things that ordinarily terrify people, like persecution, pain, suffering and death.” What he says is, “Sanctify Christ in your hearts.” “Set apart,” literally is, “sanctify.” Set apart Christ as Lord. Do you understand what he is saying here? Do not be afraid of the things other people are afraid of. The thing you should really be afraid of would be displeasing Christ. That is what you should fear. You should fear displeasing God. Set Him apart as the one you should fear, in the sense of reverence and holding Him in high esteem and doing anything to not disappoint Him. Verse 17 says, “It is better, should it possibly be God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for

doing evil.” Again, the idea is that you do not want to fear what the pagans fear to the point of fearing that instead of fearing God.

Chapter 3:18 continues by giving us a model for how to conduct ourselves in the face of this suffering. “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body, but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison.” Again, he does not state the connection directly. You must think through it. What is he doing here? Why does he suddenly bring up Christ and His death? Do not fear what they fear. Sanctify Christ. Why does he bring up Jesus’ willingness to die, unless it is an example to us, because we should be willing to die? Jesus was more afraid of not fulfilling His commission than He was afraid of dying on the cross. It was far more important for Him to fulfill His mission than it was for Him to avoid pain, and that should be your motto. He was put to death in the body in order to win His victory. Chapter 2:18 and following says the same thing, when it talks about those who are beaten, saying, “To this you are called, because Christ suffered for you.” Here is where he mixes things. “Christ suffered for you,” which is the atonement of Christ, but then comes the example of Christ right away, “leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.” We cannot follow in His steps with regard to paying for sins, but we can follow in His steps with regard to doing God’s will fearlessly. How did He do it? 1 Peter 2:22-23 tell us, “He committed no sin ... When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate ... but entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” That is what we should do, and that is exactly what Jesus did when He was on the cross. They hurled insults. They said, “If you are the Son of God, come down!” and “He saved others, but he cannot save himself.” He did not answer back. He did not leap off the cross and blow their tongues out of their mouth, which He could have done. He could have strangled them all, but He didn’t. He was silent.

He could have, but instead He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly. He was willing to suffer in silence and suffer even to the point of death when they hurled their insults at Him. Verse 24 says, “He bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” His willingness to go to the end was vital to your salvation. The implication is, of course, by way of response and gratitude, we should be willing to be loyal to Him, even if it means we have to walk His path. He makes the point again in chapter 4:1: “Since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves with the same attitude because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin.” That is a strange statement: “He who has suffered in his body is done with sin.” It comes up a couple of times here. In 2:24, this idea of being done with sin comes up perhaps for the first time. “He bore our sins in his body on the tree,” and then there is an odd way of putting it here: “having become utterly dead or unresponsive to sin.” When it says He died to sins, it is an unusual word meaning unresponsive, not dead physically, but unresponsive. It is like sin had no hold on Him anymore, not that it did before, but it had no hold whatsoever on Him. He was vindicated. The point is also made in chapter 4:1 for us also, “Because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin”—what does that mean? It means, I believe, that if you are willing to suffer for Christ, if you are willing to pay that kind of a price, then you have made a radical break with sin. If you are willing to suffer for righteousness, if you are willing to be shamed or beaten or thrown in jail, then that will be a liberating thing. If you buckle under the pressure, you have not made your commitment clear, but once you have suffered, there is a certain galvanizing effect on the Christian, and you will make a break with sin. That is what he says should be our aspiration: to be like Christ, who was, as we read in 1 Peter 3:18, “put to death with regard to the flesh, but made alive with regard to the Spirit.”

I skipped over that cryptic Noah passage in chapter 3:18 to 4:1. I am sure some of you are hoping that I will say something about the Noah passage, and I will. I will not say much, because I will tell you that whole books have been written about this, and you really do not need a 10-hour lecture on this idea that

somehow Jesus' activity bears a relationship to Noah. Chapter 3:18 ended "he was put to death in the body, but made alive in the Spirit, through whom he also went and preached to the spirits in prison." Who are they? I believe the spirits in prison are fallen angels or demons. The reason why I believe that is because there is a close parallel to Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4. We don't know what "the spirits in prison" are, but we look around and we notice that 2 Peter 2:4 says, "For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for the judgment," etc., so there it is. The evil spirits are held in dungeons or prisons. Jude 6 also gives us something similar, talking about evil-doers, broadly speaking, in context: "The angels who did not keep their positions of authority, but abandoned their homes, these he has kept in darkness bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great day." The great day is a term that means the judgment day. So I take these spirits in prison to be false spirits, demons, not people. It is not people who died a long time ago, which is one of the other views of the matter, but when Jesus died, He preached to the spirits in prison. Why would Jesus go preach to demons? The second thing I want to tell you is there are different words for "preach." There is one word for "preach," in the New Testament that means "evangelize, preach evangelistically, share the Gospel." That is the main word—*euangelizomai*.

There is another word *kerusso*, and that word means, "to make a proclamation." It would include a royal proclamation, like when the king had a son. It would include the proclamation of peace after a battle has been won or a war has ended, and that is the word that is used here. Jesus does not evangelize the demons in prison; He makes a proclamation to them. He would proclaim to them, "I won and you lost." I quoted Luther before in his critiques of James that we did not like very much, but let me quote Luther positively. Luther was once asked what Jesus did in the days between His death and His resurrection. Luther's answer was that He thumbed His nose at the devil. I think there may be a little truth to that. He went down to the demons, and you understand that the demons should not be given too much credit. Do not get your theology from Frank Peretti (modern Christian novelist); you can read his books for entertainment if you enjoy them, but do not get your theology there. Demons are not all that smart. At the beginning of Jesus' career, they are trying to keep Jesus from dying. The temptations of Satan in the wilderness are all temptations to glory without the cross. They do not want Jesus to die at the beginning. At the end, they do want Him to die. They think, "We have to kill Him," and so Satan enters Judas and Jesus is betrayed and killed. They do not know. One day they are saying to Jesus, "We know who You are. You are the holy one of God. Don't throw us into the abyss." Next time, a few chapters later, Jesus comes on the scene and they try to kill a boy who is demon-possessed. They do not know what they are doing. They are just flailing around, trying to see what works. They are not all that insightful. So Jesus says, "Guess what—you failed. You thought you were getting somewhere with Judas, but you failed." That is what Jesus did. He told the demons and Satan that their doom was sealed. The reference to Noah that comes up here has two purposes. Verses 19 and 20 say, "He preached to spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built." The reference to Noah is a reference to the idea that the demons were very active from Genesis 6:1-4, during the period after the fall of Adam and Eve and before the flood. The second thing that is going on with Noah is that Noah was one in a family of eight. Just a few were saved, and if the Christian community feels small and that all are against them and they are strangers and exiles and aliens, then surely Noah did. God saved Noah. God preserved Noah. God delivered him from the corruption of his generation. God was true to the covenant, because Noah clung to the promises and performed the very difficult obedience of making that ark. There is hope to be given. He goes on to say that this water symbolizes baptism, not removal of dirt, but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Christ. In a way, Noah was saved through a near-death experience. Everybody else was being killed and Noah escaped with difficulty, and so it may be for you. I think that is what is happening with the Noah reference, but let us return to the idea that suffering can have a salutary effect; you break decisively with sin even when people ridicule you, etc.

Chapter 4 continues, in verses 7 to 12, with some positive teaching. The positive teaching is the description of the life in the Christian community. The key thing here, as he says to them in verse 7, “the end of all things is near, be sure you are self-controlled,” verse 8, “that you love one another,” verse 9, “that you offer hospitality to each other,” and then a word or two on gifts. “Each of you should use whatever gift that he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking in the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised.”

Gifts are essential to the life of the Christian community and Peter makes known a very basic theology of gifts. First of all, gifts come from God. Second, they are an administration of God’s grace for His glory. They are not for our glory. We are not to draw attention to ourselves, but our gifts are for God’s sake. They are for the service of others, not for our pride or our rank. While they may begin with heightened natural abilities, they are spiritual through and through. Do you see the basic distinction he draws between different kinds of gifts here? There are two categories: gifts of speaking and gifts of doing, and those are the basic categories to this day. We either talk or we do. Not many people are excellent at both. There may be a couple of other ways of dividing the gifts. For example, you are either private or public and gifts could also be divided this way. Another difference would be that some gifts are more obviously supernatural and others are less obviously so, like prophecy versus teaching. Prophets do not work at their prophetic oracles; they are given to them. Teachers, on the other hand, work and use a lot of discipline, so we could classify the gifts as more supernatural and less obviously supernatural, and as public and private, but the most basic distinction is talking and doing. Use them both for the building up, for the edification of the church. One more time he tells them they must be ready for suffering, so do not be surprised—this time he uses a present imperative. Remember I told you there are two ways to give a negative command in Greek: one is “don’t start” and the other is “don’t continue.” This is “do not continue.” Do not be surprised at the fiery trials. “I know you have been surprised,” he is saying, “but stop it. Don’t be surprised. You should expect these sorts of things.” Peter predicts it. Jesus predicts it. Peter moves from the possibility to the certainty that suffering will come our way. If someone reviles you, he says in verse 14, in the name of Christ, that is a blessing to you. Do not suffer for evildoing, but suffer for the cause of Christ. Then he offers some final comforts in chapter 5. He says that Satan does roam around like a lion seeking whom he may devour. You resist. Resist with the aid of your brothers, and when you do, God will establish you. God will strengthen you and restore you, because to Him belong the dominion, the power, the glory, and thus the book of 1 Peter ends.