

**I Peter 3:15-18**  
**June 4, 2017**

**Open with Prayer**

**HOOK:**

In case you weren't here last week, we acknowledged that these Christians were under persecution from the Roman government. They were suffering trials of many kinds. They were struggling to stay the course and keep strong in their faith. So we spent most of our hour processing a foundational idea introduced by Peter, which is to "set apart Christ in our hearts." We then looked at how Peter began to unpack it with **PRINCIPLES** to live by. Last week we finished with a principle that we are to "be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you as to the hope we have – with gentleness and respect."

But Peter wasn't done yet! He was only getting started! He emphasized that we should not fear. Instead, he wants us to understand an important spiritual principle that the fear of the Lord conquers every other fear. Instead of experiencing fear as we face our enemies, we can experience blessing. He takes this idea another step. Instead of experiencing fear in the midst of our enemies, we can experience *God's grace in times of suffering* and do this with a "clear conscience."

Q: What is a conscience? [Let people engage: *con* = with, *scio* = to know. Thus, the conscience is that internal judge that witnesses to us, that enables us to "know with confidence" whether our actions are approved or disapproved!]

Analogy: Conscience may be compared to a window that lets in the light of God's truth. If we persist in disobeying, the window gets dirtier and dirtier, until the light cannot enter. This leads to a "defiled conscience" (Titus 1:15).

Q: What is a "seared conscience?" [A "seared conscience" is one that has been so sinned against that it no longer is sensitive to what is right and wrong (1 Tim. 4:2). It is even possible for the conscience to be so poisoned that it approves things that are bad and accuses when the person does good! The Bible calls "an evil conscience" (Heb. 10:22). A criminal feels guilty if he "squeals" on his friends, but happy if he succeeds in his crime!]

**Transition:** Let's consider that all of us CAN maintain a clear conscience in times of trial and opposition BY understanding the WAYS a good conscience helps us in difficult circumstances. And as a bonus, let's look for the motivation Peter offers us to maintain a good conscience. Let's begin.

**BOOK (NIV 1984):**

V.15:

- But **in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.** But do this with gentleness and respect,

V.16:

- keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

V.17:

- It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

V.18:

- For 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,

### Process Questions:

Q: Peter tells us how we are to share our hope in Christ with gentleness and respect. Why is it critical that we share our hope 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]

Q: How does a good conscience help us in times of trial and opposition?

- It fortifies us with courage because we know we are right with God and men and therefore do not need to be afraid.
- It gives us peace in our hearts.
- It removes from us the fear of what other people may know about us, say against us, or do to us. (When Christ is Lord and we fear only God, we need not fear the threats, opinions, or actions of our enemies.)

Q V.16: Why is it important to have a clear conscience?

- So that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander
- It is better to suffer for doing good than doing evil.

Q: How do we maintain a good conscience?

- We must deal with sin in our lives and confess it immediately (I John 1:9) To go back to our original analogy, we need to "keep the window clean."
- We need to spend time in the Word and "let the light in."
- We need to obey what we learn in the Word of God.

Q: What does Peter offer as our motivation to keep Christ set apart in our hearts, to keep a clear conscience, and to suffer for doing good? [The fact that Christ was willing to suffer on the cross to die **once for all** (Peter declares the complete sufficiency of Christ's death) for both the righteous and the unrighteous]

Observation: The phrase "bring us to God" is a technical term that means "gain audience at court." Because of the work of Christ on the cross, we now have an open access to God (Eph. 2:18; 3:12). We may come boldly to His throne! (Heb. 10:19ff) We also have access to His marvelous grace to meet our daily needs (Rom. 5:2). When the veil of the temple was torn, it symbolized the new and open way to God through Jesus Christ.

**LOOK:**

To keep a clear conscience, let's stay engaged with the Word of God that allows His light to shine on our conscience. Let's spend time in prayer and fellowship with Him and our brotherhood. When the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, let's be quick to repent.

**Close in Prayer**

### **Commentaries for Today's Lesson:**

**Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 2, pp. 414–420). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.**

What does it mean to “sanctify Christ as Lord” in our hearts? It means to turn everything over to Him, and to live only to please Him and glorify Him. It means to fear displeasing Him rather than fear what men might do to us. How wonderfully this approach simplifies our lives! It is Matthew 6:33 and Romans 12:1–2 combined into a daily attitude of faith that obeys God’s Word in spite of consequences. It means being satisfied with nothing less than the will of God in our lives (John 4:31–34). One evidence that Jesus Christ is Lord in our lives is the readiness with which we witness to others about Him and seek to win them to Christ.

### **Maintain a Good Conscience (1 Peter 3:16–17)**

Our word “conscience” comes from two Latin words: *con*, meaning “with,” and *scio*, meaning “to know.” The conscience is that internal judge that witnesses to us, that enables us to “know with,” either approving our actions or accusing (see Rom. 2:14–15). Conscience may be compared to a window that lets in the light of God’s truth. If we persist in disobeying, the window gets dirtier and dirtier, until the light cannot enter. This leads to a “defiled conscience” (Titus 1:15). A “seared conscience” is one that has been so sinned against that it no longer is sensitive to what is right and wrong (1 Tim. 4:2). It is even possible for the conscience to be so poisoned that it approves things that are bad and accuses when the person does good! This the Bible calls “an evil conscience” (Heb. 10:22). A criminal feels guilty if he “squeals” on his friends, but happy if he succeeds in his crime!

Conscience depends on knowledge, the “light” coming through the window. As a believer studies the Word, he better understands the will of God, and his conscience becomes more sensitive to right and wrong. A “good conscience” is one that accuses when we think or do wrong and approves when we do right. It takes “exercise” to keep the conscience strong and pure (Acts 24:16). If we do not grow in spiritual knowledge and obedience, we have a “weak conscience” that is upset very easily by trifles (1 Cor. 8).

How does a good conscience help a believer in times of trial and opposition? For one thing, it fortifies him with courage because he knows he is right with God and men, so that he need not be afraid. Inscribed on Martin Luther’s monument at Worms, Germany are his courageous words spoken before the church council on April 18, 1521: “Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me. Amen.” His conscience, bound to God’s Word, gave him the courage to defy the whole established church!

A good conscience also gives us peace in our hearts; and when we have peace within, we can face battles without. The restlessness of an uneasy conscience divides the heart and drains the strength of a person, so that he is unable to function at his best. How can we boldly witness for Christ if conscience is witnessing against us?

A good conscience removes from us the fear of what other people may know about us, say against us, or do to us. When Christ is Lord and we fear only God, we need not fear the threats, opinions, or actions of our enemies. “The Lord is on my side; I will not fear: what can man do unto me?” (Ps. 118:6) It was in this matter that Peter failed when he feared the enemy and denied the Lord.

Peter made it clear that conscience *alone* is not the test of what is right or wrong. A person can be involved in either “welldoing” or “evildoing.” For a person to disobey God’s Word and

claim it is right simply because his conscience does not convict him, is to admit that something is radically wrong with his conscience. Conscience is a safe guide only when the Word of God is the teacher.

More and more, Christians in today's society are going to be accused and lied about. Our personal standards are not those of the unsaved world. As a rule, Christians do not *create* problems; they *reveal* them. Let a born-again person start to work in an office, or move into a college dormitory, and in a short time there will be problems. Christians are lights in this dark world (Phil. 2:15), and they reveal "the unfruitful works of darkness" (Eph. 5:11).

When Joseph began to serve as steward in Potiphar's house, and refused to sin, he was falsely accused and thrown into prison. The government officials in Babylon schemed to get Daniel in trouble because his life and work were a witness against them. Our Lord Jesus Christ by His very life on earth revealed the sinful hearts and deeds of people, and this is why they crucified Him (see John 15:18–25). "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12).

If we are to maintain a good conscience, we must deal with sin in our lives and confess it immediately (1 John 1:9). We must "keep the window clean." We must also spend time in the Word of God and "let in the light." A strong conscience is the result of obedience based on knowledge, and a strong conscience makes for a strong Christian witness to the lost. It also gives us strength in times of persecution and difficulty.

No Christian should ever suffer because of evildoing, and no Christian should be surprised if he suffers for welldoing. Our world is so mixed up that people "call evil good, and good evil" and "put darkness for light, and light for darkness" (Isa. 5:20). The religious leaders of Jesus' day called Him "a malefactor," which means "a person who does evil things" (John 18:29–30). How wrong people can be!

As times of difficulty come to the church, we must cultivate Christian love; for we will need one another's help and encouragement as never before. We must also maintain a good conscience, because a good conscience makes for a strong backbone and a courageous witness. The secret is to practice the lordship of Jesus Christ. If we fear God, we need not fear men. "Shame arises from the fear of men," said Samuel Johnson. "Conscience, from the fear of God."

## **LEARNING FROM NOAH**

### *1 Peter 3:18–22*

A pastor was teaching a Bible study on Matthew 16, explaining the many interpretations of our Lord's words to Peter, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church" (Matt. 16:18). Afterward, a woman said to him, "Pastor, I'll bet if Jesus had known all the trouble those words would cause, He would never have said them!"

When Peter wrote this section of his letter, he had no idea that it would be classified as one of the most difficult portions of the New Testament. Good and godly interpreters have wrestled with these verses, debated and disagreed, and have not always left behind a great deal of spiritual help. We may not be able to solve all the problems found in this section, but we do want to get the practical help that Peter gave to encourage Christians in difficult days.

The section presents three different ministries. If we understand these ministries, we will be better able to suffer in the will of God and glorify Christ.

## The Ministry of Christ (1 Peter 3:18–22)

Everything else in this paragraph is incidental to what Peter had to say about Jesus Christ. This material is parallel to what Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:21ff. Peter presented Jesus Christ as the perfect example of one who suffered unjustly, and yet obeyed God.

**The death of Christ (v. 18).** In 1 Peter 3:17, Peter wrote about suffering for well-doing rather than for evil-doing; and then he gave the example of Jesus Christ. Jesus was the “just One” (Acts 3:14), and yet He was treated unjustly. Why? That He might die for the unjust ones and bring them to God! He died as a substitute (1 Peter 2:24), and He died only once (Heb. 9:24–28). In other words, Jesus suffered for well-doing; He did not die because of His own sins, for He had none (1 Peter 2:22).

The phrase “bring us to God” is a technical term that means “gain audience at court.” Because of the work of Christ on the cross, we now have an open access to God (Eph. 2:18; 3:12). We may come boldly to His throne! (Heb. 10:19ff) We also have access to His marvelous grace to meet our daily needs (Rom. 5:2). When the veil of the temple was torn, it symbolized the new and open way to God through Jesus Christ.

**Raymer, R. M. (1985). 1 Peter. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures (Vol. 2, pp. 848-855). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.**

3:15. In their **hearts** Christians are to **set apart Christ as Lord**. Alexander Maclaren wrote, “Only he who can say, ‘The Lord is the strength of my life’ can go on to say, ‘Of whom shall I be afraid?’” (*Expositions of Holy Scriptures*, 16:42) Christians should overcome fear by sanctifying (*hagiasate*, “make separate from others”) Christ as their Lord (*kyrion*). As a result Christians should **always be prepared** (*hetoimoi*, “ready”; cf. 1:5) **to give ... the reason** (*apologian*, the “defense” which a defendant makes before a judge; cf. Acts 22:1; 25:16) **for their hope** in Christ. Such an oral defense should be consistent with one’s “set-apart” conduct.

3:16. A believer’s testimony should not be given in an arrogant manner but **with gentleness and respect**. (“Respect” here is from *phobos*, “fear,” whereas “respect” for one’s wife [v. 7] is *timē*, “honor.”) Christians who are not afraid in the face of persecution are able to witness respectfully to their faith in Christ. They then keep **a clear** (*agathēn*, “good”) **conscience** (*syneidēsin*; cf. 2:19; 3:21). Peter may have been alluding to the occasion when he denied Christ out of fear, in words that were neither gentle nor respectful.

Christians who suffer unjustly and keep a clear conscience put to shame those who **slander their good behavior in Christ**. Once again Peter encouraged his readers with the fact that good behavior is their best defense against unjust punishment and persecution.

3:17. However, Peter pointed out that it may be **God’s will** (*thelēma*; cf. 2:15; 4:2, 19) for them **to suffer for doing good** (cf. 1:6; 2:15; 4:16, 19). This, as he told them earlier, “is commendable before God” (2:20) and so is **better** than deserved suffering **for doing evil** (cf. 2:14). First Peter 3:17 is an effective summary of the content of 2:15, 19–20.

3:18. In verses 18–22 Peter illustrated the principles given in verses 13–17. Once again Christ provided the perfect example. He suffered for doing what was right (2:14). His sinless life provoked the unjust hostilities of evil men. However, He did not fear men but trusted Himself to God. Christ clearly stated His purpose and committed Himself to a course of action. He died in mankind’s place, keeping His conscience clear (cf. 2:23). As a result He received tremendous blessing and reward in His own resurrection and exultation.

J.M.E. Ross wrote that verse 18 is “one of the shortest and simplest, and yet one of the richest summaries given in the New Testament of the meaning of the Cross of Jesus” (“The First Epistle of Peter,” in *A Devotional Commentary*. London: Religious Tract Society, pp. 151–52). **Christ died for sins** (cf. 2:21, 24). The phrase “for sins” (*peri hamartiōn*) is used in the Septuagint in regard to the sin offering for atonement. However, **once for all** (cf. Rom. 6:10; Heb. 9:26, 28; 10:10) is clearly a contrast with the Old Testament yearly sacrifice on the Day of Atonement and declares the complete sufficiency of Christ’s death. The substitutionary nature of Christ’s death is indicated by the phrase **the righteous for the unrighteous** (*dikaios hyper adikōn*). Christ, the “righteous One” (*dikaios*), uniquely qualified to die as the substitute for (*hyper*, “for,” “in place of,” or “instead of”) the “unrighteous ones” (*adikōn*). The divine purpose for Christ’s sacrificial death was man’s reconciliation, **to bring people to God**.

Peter concluded his summary of Christ’s redemptive work by referring to His resurrection. Though Christ **was put to death in the body** (*sarki*, “flesh”), He was **made alive by the Spirit**. “By the Spirit” translates one word, *pneumati*, which could refer to the third Person of the Trinity as the agent of Christ’s resurrection. Or it may refer to Christ’s human spirit in contrast with His human body (cf. 1 Peter 4:6).