

This past week you may have seen the dramatic footage of a group of people rescuing a grey whale caught in a fishing net. These animal rescues always intrigue me because they are fraught with tension and the potential for harm. These people go to do good. They know being stuck in that net will lead to death, even if the animal doesn't know it. Oftentimes the animals don't get that the rescuers are there to help them, they lash out, and the rescuers get hurt. So, every time these rescue missions take place, they have to ask how do we engage this animal in order to rescue it and keep from doing harm even if the animal lashes out and harms one of us?

As Christians, we have to ask and answer the same set of questions. God has sent us on a rescue mission, to engage this dark world with the Gospel in order to free others from the bondage of sin and death. But, like some of these animals, not everyone recognizes we come to do good, and their lashing out can lead to suffering for those who are on the rescue mission and tempt us to respond in a way that does more harm than good. So, how do we engage in a way that stays focused on the mission, expresses the heart of God to those we engage, and responds biblically when they lash out and harm us? We continue our series *Engaging Culture* this morning by looking at 1 Peter 3. Peter is writing to a group of believers who are engaging the culture but experiencing suffering as a result. He gives three principles of engagement, what to do, and what not to do.

When you engage, fear God, don't fear man. Our rescue mission must start with an unwavering devotion to the one who sends us.

[1 Peter 3:13-15a] ¹³ Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy.

Peter begins by saying if you do good in the way Jesus showed us how to do good, it may go...good. Don't begin your engagement with the assumption everyone is out to get you. But we live in a fallen world, Jesus said the world will hate us like it hated him, and there are times when the culture, i.e. people, will push back and lash out because of our actions, beliefs, and words. What do we do in those moments? Peter says we are not to fear them.

Fear tempts us to believe God is not strong enough to redeem whatever you experience, and that leads us to moments of fight or flight. Just think about the last time you were afraid. You probably bowed up or bailed out. In the 80's, when your listening device was called a boombox, I was carrying mine one day and the power cord was dragging behind me. When I turned around, my eyes played a trick on me, and it looked like a snake was following me. I've never run so fast in my life! When we let fear of man take root, we either fight, pitting us as adversaries with the very people we're sent to, or we flee, causing us to disengage or compromise. We don't want to be rejected, called intolerant, experience loss for following Christ, so our beliefs and convictions change with the ever-changing values of culture. If you listen to many of these faith deconstruction stories these days, so many of them begin with some belief in the culture causing that person to question what is in Scripture.

But what does God say? He knows we're prone to fear so, once again, he tells us his most oft-repeated command: Don't fear them. Follow me. 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?'" God will

redeem any suffering you experience on his account. He is with us, we can trust him, and because of that, we can remain committed to him and resolute in his Word when the culture pushes back.

I want to share something with you that I don't think I have spoken of from the platform but, given that it's Family Sunday, I do so delicately and discreetly. In the beginning, God united Adam and Eve, man and woman, together and instituted his plan for marriage and family. I have a brother who lives a lifestyle different than that. As you might suspect, it created some challenges for my family and me. My beliefs were unpopular and met with disappointment and hurt. My family was never unkind to me, but it made me an outlier, and while it wasn't a regular discussion, it was present. I had to decide to hold fast to what God says and let the consequences come, or fear man and either push back or compromise my beliefs. By God's grace I have continued to follow him and live in that tension for 25 years. I don't know what it's going to be for you but, if you live your life for Christ and intentionally engage the culture, you'll have moments of pushback, moments where you may pay a price for your faith, and moments when you'll have to decide to fear God and continue to follow him. If you do, Peter says you will be blessed as a result.

If I ended the message there, it would be good and true. But we can't stop there because Peter doesn't stop there. Jesus is Lord and Savior, and all our engagement must be centered on that truth. But there is a biblical approach we must engage with if we are to fully express the heart of God and be effective in our engagement.

When you engage, give a defense, don't get defensive. Our tone and posture are as much as part of our message as our words and beliefs.

[1 Peter 3:15-16] In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

When we engage for Christ, we'll experience pushback, but we'll also have opportunities to share the Gospel with our words and show it through our actions. That opportunity to share might come to us as confrontation, curiosity, or desperation, but whatever it is, we have to be ready. If we are prepared, we can respond. If we are not, we may react.

Peter says we are to make a defense of the hope that is in us. There is nothing combative about that word. "Defense" is where we get our word "apologetic", a reasoning for our hope in Christ that is presented for the sake of understanding and invitation. *Here's what I believe, here's why I believe it, and here's how you can too.* But if we're not ready, that exchange can quickly escalate and become a debate. As I said last week, you cannot win over someone you intend to defeat. So, we are to prepare and present a defense in order to play offense. We just can't be offensive.

For all of us, whether it's on a college campus or somewhere else in the culture, think about how the marketplace of ideas behaves these days. The most passionate of positions are often communicated with hostility. **Imagine how we would stand out if we didn't respond in kind but kindly respond.** Peter says our response is to be gentle, which expresses humility, and

respectful, which expresses a care and concern for the other person. Every kernel of truth must be seasoned with love and invitation. Our message will be different because it will sound different.

Here's why that's important. If you are a believer, you may have forgotten how offensive and challenging the gospel is. It says we are all wretches, broken and wicked beyond self-repair. Not a great conversation starter! We forget that grace is offensive. Years ago, I had a coworker, who knew I was a Christian, ask me, "So what's up with all this Jesus stuff?" It wasn't hostile or hopeful, but curious. I gave a defense for the hope that was in me. After hearing the gospel, she paused, then proclaimed "Wait a minute! You mean to tell me if Hitler believed in Jesus right before he died, he would have gone to heaven?!?!?" You know it's getting serious when someone asks about Hitler's salvation. We love God's grace when we finally accept how much we need it, but to those who aren't there yet, it doesn't yet sound like good news. When we share our hope with gentleness and respect, we communicate to the other person that we care for them, we want for them what we have been given, and it's a safe space for them to work it all out.

And what follows our words must be behavior that shows this hope has made a difference. I tried to love my brother and his significant other well because I love them. Period. It was the right thing to do. But I also know that, if anyone thought my beliefs were evil, they were looking to confirm that through my actions. I wanted people to have to say, "His beliefs are evil, but he sure is nice." Jesus told us to love our neighbor. That includes telling the truth and it includes valuing them as someone made in God's image whom God wants to be with forever. And I want to also say this. If you are in the same place as my brother, I want you to know God loves you, we love you, we have no condemnation for you, you are welcome here, and we want God's best for you and would love to talk about it with you.

When you engage, suffer for good, don't suffer for evil. If we are to suffer as a result of our engagement, let us suffer in a way that can be used by God.

[1 Peter 3:17-18] ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. ¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.

The world is suffering because of all the evil we do to each other and, if Christians participate in that, we're no different. Elsewhere in 1 Peter he says if you do evil and suffer because of it, that's on you! But what if we suffer for doing good? Earlier I said God would redeem that suffering for you, but God will also redeem that suffering for the sake of others. Our suffering is a powerful testimony because it says to others, *I am so secure in this hope, so confident in my Savior, and so committed to inviting you into this hope, that I am willing to go through all of this without fighting back or dropping out.* Just think about how inspiring all these Olympic athletes grueling training regimen has been as they pursue medals. They were willing to go through it because it's all worth it in the end. Do you feel the same way about your suffering?

Our engagement strategy has to include a willingness to suffer. To pick up our cross, as Jesus said. I'm convinced, though, the American Dream is becoming more and more just a pursuit of avoiding suffering. **But if we are not willing to suffer for the Gospel, it likely won't spread through us.** Jesus is our example. His suffering accomplished our salvation by paying the penalty of our sin. It

reconciled us to God and brought those who put their faith in him into relationship with God. Our suffering does not do that, but our willingness to do what's good in the eyes of God and suffer because of it can be used by God to bring others to himself.

Prepare your defense. A pastor who used to be part of the Nation of Islam said last week he and his group used to eat Christians for breakfast because they had no idea what they believed and why they believed it. I think he's right. Too many of us are ill-prepared to have a faith conversation with someone who really wants to know.

Seniors, has your parents' faith become your own? I know you're still a work in progress. We all are. Many of you are about to go to universities where the Gospel is not welcome. You may be confronted by peer pressure, social pressure, teacher pressure, cancel culture. Are you prepared to respond well? If not, it's going to be tough. I want to encourage you to make finding a faith community a priority, dive deep in God's Word, grow in your relationship with Jesus, and see yourself as a missionary, sent to do good on those campuses and be a mouthpiece for God.

For the rest of us, how would you respond if someone came up to you tomorrow and asked you why you are a Christian? Don't be caught unprepared. Give it some thought and practice and go into your life hoping people will ask you about your hope! If you're not prepared and don't know where to start, answer these three questions: **Who was I before Christ? What do I believe about Christ (bonus points for knowing where it is in Scripture)? What difference has Christ made in me?** If you can answer those three questions, you have a defense to make. Remember, God ultimately convicts and convinces. That's not our job. Our job is to talk about our hope, and the richer our testimony, the more it can be used by God.

Don't let your conviction of God's Word cloud your love for others. I have been struggling with this recently. You see, my brother passed away about two months ago. I debated telling you that. It's an emotional wallop and it can get us off the point of the passage. But you're my family and I want to share those things with you (please pray for me and especially for my mom). But I also share that because I have been giving a lot of thought to the question "Did my commitment to God and his Word ever make my brother question my love for him?" And the answer is, I don't know. I've been in Texas and he in Illinois since 1998 and, if truth be told, we didn't have a very close relationship. There was no animosity, and it was great when we were together, but it just didn't have much substance to it. And so, I stand here this morning with a bit of wonder and a bunch of regret. I don't want that for you.

When you live your life for God and engage people with the Gospel, remember that God loves them so much that he sent his Son to die for them. Don't ever waver from doing good and committing to God's Word. But also don't get the first part right and miss out on the rest, because it can render our words obsolete or do damage. You are a walking, talking invitation God has sent to those who don't know him. Your life is to be an expression of God's love and God's desire to be with them forever. Go truthfully, go gently, go lovingly, and trust God to create opportunities for you to talk all about the hope we have in him.