

Years ago, I heard somebody ask, "If you were charged with the crime of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

Well today, we're sorta going to be talking about that. We know that the persecution of Christians, is a very real thing. In a secular newspaper this week (The Australian), they quoted some statistics:

In recent years, the persecution of Christians has reached unprecedented levels. A 2019 report commissioned by British foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt found Christians constitute 80 per cent of the world's victims of religious persecution. Yet only about 30 per cent of religious followers are Christian.ⁱ

80% of religious persecution, is copped by Christians...

In many situations, being a Christian paints a target on our backs. But in what way are we identified as being Christians? What's the evidence to convict us? Peter refers to it as our "Good behaviour in Christ". But to give it a bit of a twist, our Good Behaviour in Christ, is very much linked with suffering **for Christ**.

In V13, he asks: **who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?** ... And that's a rhetorical question that begs the answer "No one!" – No one would want to harm us if we're striving really hard to do what's good... But the thing is, **they do...**

And so the rhetorical question **who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?**, well, lots of people

can harm us physically, but on the day of judgment, we will be vindicated/justified (when people realise, “Hey, you Christians were right”) –

And, it's not just that God will stand in our corner on that day – It's because God is the judge,,, and disciples of Jesus Christ, aren't the ones who are going to be in the dock – it's going to be those who have rejected Jesus, and those who have persecuted the righteous...

Righto: So, in this paragraph of his letter, Peter identifies 5 features of good behaviour in Christ. And the first is:

1. Being zealous for what is Good

Disciples of Jesus, are zealous for what is good.

To be zealous, is an eager striving; enthusiasm; - it's to be excitedly seeking after something.. And that thing we are seeking after, and striving for, is: “For what is good”...

And in the context of this reading, it's about being zealous for Christ... It's not just a zealousness for morality – it's a zealousness for Jesus.

Back in Chapter 2, Peter mentioned how we have tasted that the Lord is Good... We've got a taste for Christ – we've experienced Him – we've experienced the wonder and the joy of, not just being loved by God, but by being brought into this intimate relationship with Him...

And if we have truly tasted Christ, and **know** that He is Good, How could we not be excited about Him? How could **He not**

become the most significant aspect of our life and our universe???

And to be zealous for what is Good – it's not just about “good behaviour”, and it isn't just about “being excited about our theological knowledge (what we know about God)” – it's all of this:

- Relationship that we experience, and we want others to know about it, and how they can experience the best thing ever – intimate loving relationship with the creator, redeemer and judge; **and**
- It's about living to please Him – doing good – living good...

Now, generally the world is OK with Christians – for us to be ‘well behaved’,,, but only when it aligns with what our culture considers “good behaviour”, and so there's times when they're **not** so happy with us... And the other time they're not so happy about Christians being well behaved, is when Christians are **so** well behaved, it makes unbelievers look bad... Do you know what I mean by that???

2 aspects:

Sometimes the world decides that something is good, when God has named it evil. So e.g... God tells us to worship no other God but Him – YHWH is an exclusive God – there is no other. Jesus said, **“I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father, except through me.”**,,, But the values of our culture hate the very thought of that. They see it as ‘arrogance’ and ‘excluding’, and ‘intolerant’, when to our culture ‘tolerance’ as a/the key virtue... Alright, so it's ok for you to be a Christian, as long

as you have the view that every religion is just as valid,,, which of course, is a lie...

And the second aspect, is something we talked about a couple of months ago – the rebellious **like** to live in darkness, because the light exposes their evil deeds. When DOJ live righteously, next-door to people who are doing the wrong thing, they'll become consciously aware that they don't make the grade. Darkness doesn't seem so dark, until it gets compared to light. And so Christians get ridiculed – goody goodies; religious nut-case...

But we're zealous for what is Good. We're zealous for Jesus, and we're zealous to live in a way that pleases Him.

And by common law, we **shouldn't** be harmed for being zealous for what is good,,, but unfortunately, our lawmakers are becoming so ungodly, that by the law, Christians **can** be harmed for being zealous for Christ... (BTW “injustice”-condemned for righteousness)

And a judge of the supreme court may very well punish Christians for being zealous for Christ (various anti-discrimination legislations),,, But there will come a day where that judge, **and** the ones who have written the laws, will stand before the ultimate judge...

And on that day, DOJ who suffered unjustly, for righteousness sake, will be blessed.

Which brings us to the 2nd feature of good behaviour in Christ...

2. DOJ will often suffer for righteousness sake.

Now, when we suffer for righteousness sake, that's what we call "injustice". And just like Jesus suffered a great injustice, so will many of His followers.

But we need not fear this suffering... Did you know, that's the main reason for persecution – the Devil (and the children of the Devil) want us to be afraid... They want us to be so afraid, that we stop being zealous for Jesus... Sadly, many Christians are ineffective, and they're **not** zealous for Jesus, because they **are** afraid... And it's not that they're afraid of losing their life /being jailed/torture,, just afraid of getting embarrassed/bit of ridicule/not everybody will be their friend...

But Peter tells us, that: ¹⁴ ... even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,

But, how are we blessed? Well, Jesus told us: Matthew 5: (ESV) ¹⁰ "**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**"

And Peter reminds us, that Christ also suffered, and through His suffering and through **His** physical death, He has brought us to God – that's the blessing... We may very well suffer now, but what a privilege – to suffer for righteousness sake... For ours is the kingdom of Heaven. And short-term suffering – that's not so bad, with what we're looking forward to...

3. in your hearts, honour Christ the Lord as holy

This is something that sets true believers apart...

It's only a couple of days since Christmas... We didn't have Christmas carols as a community event this year. But at Christmas time, it's not uncommon, that even unbelievers give a bit of lip-service to Jesus... *If we watch the carols on the television, we'll often see celebrities – Some of whom live quite selfish, godless, immoral lives, and they take the stage to sing Christmas carols that proclaim the holiness of Christ the Lord, born in a manger...*

But to many who sing it, and many who hear it, they're just empty words / seasonal words / religious words...

But for DOJ, these words mean much more than this... We honour Him, and we acknowledge His holiness (not just with our words) with our hearts. It's much more than an some kind of intellectual recognition – it's something that comes from the heart...

Fourthly, Good behaviour in Christ includes

4. Being prepared to witness.

As Christians, we're different to others. Do you remember the address that Peter wrote on this letter? **To those who are elect exiles** Or as the NIV puts it: **To God's elect, strangers in the world**

Do you sometimes feel like a stranger in the world / don't fit in ??? There's a reason for that – We're different. We belong to a different kingdom. We belong to the Kingdom of God – not the Kingdom of this world. Light/Darkness.

And when we live by the values of the Kingdom of God, others will notice that we're different.

- When we suffer unjustly for the sake of Christ, others will notice that;
- When we're struck on the right cheek, and we don't retaliate, and we turn the other cheek, others will notice that;
- When we honour Christ from our hearts (and it's not just lip-service), that'll be noticed; and
- When we live lives of submission, and not standing up for ourselves, and putting others needs before our own, that'll be noticed...

And occasionally, somebody will be struck by this very different way of life that we live...

And they'll see that our hope, and what we're living for, is unique... and sometimes they'll ask, "What's this hope that you have?" and Peter says:

V15 always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you

Be prepared... A child-like faith is all we need, but let's be able to articulate, what that is...

Let's never be ashamed of Jesus. And let's be prepared to tell others, **why** we have the hope we have. "God has been so gracious to me – he's rescued me from death to life – from sin to holiness..."

Let's be prepared to tell them that when I was baptised, I died to the things of this world, and I'm alive in Christ... And even if the world puts me in prison or kills me for my faith in Jesus, they can't take eternal life away from me...

And let's be prepared to tell them that we are so sure of the Gospel because we're already in relationship with God – we commune with Him in prayer, and we know His presence, and He gives us tremendous hope and joy...

Are you with me? We don't need to make anything up – just be prepared to explain the hope that we have in Christ...

But as with everything we do, when we share our faith, we do it with

5. Gentleness and respect.

Good behaviour in Christ, includes gentleness and respect...

Sharing the Gospel isn't supposed to be about pushy salesmanship. It's about gently and respectfully sharing our faith...

Peter tells us, that when we have gentleness and respect, this gives us ¹⁶ ... a good conscience, so that, when you are

slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame.

It's hurtful, being slandered, isn't it... Jesus was slandered... Do you remember the false accusations the religious leaders made about Him??? And as Christians, we need to be ready for it – we **will** be slandered... And do you notice there, it's our **good behaviour in Christ** that we get criticised for... And so as we do the right thing, and we get slandered because of it...

But remain gentle; and remain respectful.

I'm reminded of something that happened with the Apostle Paul...

- He was hauled before the religious authorities; and
- The high priest ordered that he be struck; and
- he was; and
- Paul said, “**God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?**”;
- And the others there went “Ahhh, are you going to talk like that to God's High priest?”; and
- Paul apologises: “I didn't know he was God's high priest, because the scriptures tell say: **You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people**

Even though the high priest of God was persecuting the people of God, Paul acknowledged that he should've been giving him respect...

And sometimes, we Christians get it into our heads that we should only respect the authorities if they're good, or if their actions align with what we want,, but even as we suffer persecution, we must always be respectful...

And Peter gives us the reason why: - so that **those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame.**

If as Christians, we do the right thing, and we're respectful, and we're gentle, those who put us down, **will** be put to shame... Now, that may happen in the world as we know it, but ultimately, or not. But, those who unjustly persecute the disciples of Jesus, will be put to shame, on the Day of Judgment, when Jesus returns...

The fact of the matter is, that Christians may suffer unjustly – we may suffer for righteousness sake - , simply because we follow Christ... That doesn't mean that we rebel, and take matters into our own hands... It doesn't mean we lead an insurrection against the government; And it doesn't mean that we target those who target us.... Because that's the way of the world – not the way of the Kingdom of God.

And so Peter says: ¹⁷ **For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.**

Make sense???

If we suffer for doing evil, well we deserve it, and it's our own jolly fault...

But that statement that Peter just made, is something that a lot of Christians can't/won't accept... That sometimes, it's God's will for us to suffer, even though we've been doing good...

That messes with some people's theology... You've probably heard it said:

- Jesus suffered so that we won't suffer;
- Jesus was killed so we won't be killed;
- Jesus' body was broken, so we can be healed;

You've heard that said, haven't you...

Unfortunately, a weak faith – a worldly, fleshly view takes the eternal promises of God, and applies them to today...

You see, Jesus told us that in this life, there will be troubles / persecutions / hardships / suffering... But in glory, when Jesus returns, we're going to have a new body – no more suffering / pain / persecution / being-made-fun-of / injustice...

But until then, at times, God's will, is for us to suffer... Do you know why? It's because that's the way of Jesus... When we were baptised, we were baptised into Christ's death, and His resurrection... Most people only want to be baptised into His resurrection, and not into His death... But you see, that skips the whole step of God transforming us..

The Apostle Paul, puts it like this:

Romans 5: (ESV) ³ ..., but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame,

because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Do you follow that? And do you understand **why** God allows us to suffer – No, it's more than that – why it is God's will for us to suffer???

Suffering —> endurance —> character —> hope

- Endurance demonstrates that our faith is real; and
- It produces character. What sort of character? The character of Christ. Jesus was the Suffering Servant. And we suffer, as He suffered; and
- Character produces hope.

And so ultimately, when we don't suffer, we don't hope. We don't hope for the future that is to come...

Some of the most wonderful; faithful; hopeful people I know, are those who suffer greatly... - people who are so ready, to go and be with Jesus... - filled with hope – they're so looking forward to being with Him...

What a privilege it is, to suffer for Jesus... Jesus suffered, so that we might be saved. He's brought us to God, and he's made us alive in the Spirit.

As Christians, we are the most persecuted group in the world... But let's not hide the evidence that we are Christians... If we're going to suffer, let's suffer for

righteousness sake, and we will be blessed. And so, we hold on to the hope that we have.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/christmas-is-the-season-of-hope-for-persecuted-christians/news-story/75440d05f0116211a667a937be19351e>