

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 28, Number 50

December 16, 2012



Are You Ready?

And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good? But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled; But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ. (1 Peter 3:13–16, KJV 1900)

We see and hear much in our day about Christian apologetics. By apologetics, we do not convey that Christians apologize for being Christians, as if they did something wrong. The classical meaning of the word refers to a clear explanation and defense of one's faith. We associate the term with First Peter 3:15 because of Peter's words, "...be ready always to **give an answer.**" In this verse, **answer** was translated from the Greek root of the English word **apology**, as in **apologetics**. To know what we believe with clarity, conviction, and specific knowledge of Scripture is Biblical and commendable. Scripture includes many examples. A sadly weak faith is one that says, "I know what I believe, but I can't explain it to anyone in words." Peter tells us that we are to be ready or equipped and prepared to give an answer for our hope. Paul stood before Greek philosophers on Mars Hill (Acts 17), both affirming and defending his faith. He and other apostles frequently went to synagogues when they arrived in a city to preach and to defend their faith. Paul exercised a form of "In-house" apologetics when he confronted the Galatians who heard his preaching, but shortly thereafter fell prey to false teachers.

Much of modern apologetics presents and defends the faith based on philosophical principles. In certain situations, that method is appropriate. Consider that Paul didn't quote Old Testament Scriptures to the Greek philosophers on Mars Hill. He actually quoted from two ancient Greek philosophers and applied their words to "Jesus and the resurrection," the heart of his gospel at all times. However, Peter directs his readers--and us--to follow a different method.

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready.... Peter here describes a simpler and more personal method of "Apologetics." This lesson deals with what we might call "One-on-one" apologetics. This method is wholly different from Paul's "Philosophical" apologetics on Mars Hill. If Paul had not known the ancient Greek philosophers, he could not have reasoned as he did with the men on Mars Hill. Most believers in that time--or today--were not knowledgeable of those ancient writers. Likely most of Peter's readers knew

little or nothing about them. No problem; Peter's teaching deals with a wholly different form of explaining and defending one's faith. For Peter, the first step in defending the faith was not to read Greek poets and philosophers. It was far more personal to his readers. What does it mean to sanctify the Lord God in your heart? How do you do that? What does this have to do with explaining and defending your faith? According to Peter, it has everything to do with your faith. Review Peter's exhortations in the closing verses of the second chapter. Christ left us an example. When wicked men reviled Him, He didn't respond to them with reviling words. When sinful men heaped suffering and pain upon Him, He didn't inflict suffering on them in return. Neither did He threaten them. He committed Himself to the Father's wise and righteous judgment. Yes, those vile men shall suffer, but their day of suffering awaits them, and they shall face it before the Father's judgment, not ours. We can sanctify the Lord in our hearts only to the extent that we follow Jesus' example. This behavior is the key to Peter's teaching that we here examine.

...be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear. Peter leads us to a startling, but vital truth regarding our life's witness to those around us, people who know us where we live. Do not miss the obvious point. If we aren't living our faith so faithfully and consistently that our lifestyle raises questions in the minds of those who know us, we have no Biblical basis for explaining and defending our faith. Nothing in this lesson occurs until someone asks you for a reason for your hope. If you conduct your life in the same way that they live, they will have no questions about your conduct. Only as you live out Jesus' example in your life will people take notice of you and ask the question, "I've observed you in various situations. You don't react the way other people do to insults and to criticism. They criticize you, and you treat them with kindness. I'd snap their head off with my words, but you react with gentle kindness. What makes you tick? How can you be optimistic and gracious when your candidate just lost the election?"

When our culture just gave its approval to ungodly lifestyles that you and your faith reject?" Ah, the true character of Christian faith stands out and challenges us in life's trials, not in the bright sunshine of good days. When these believers could be killed on the spot for simply being a Christian, Peter commands them to so faithfully live out their faith that people notice them and ask them to explain their hope. If they showed despair at the disappointments of life, there would be no question, would there? According to all the external criteria, these people should be wholly depressed and gloomy, but instead the most noticeable trait about them is "hope." Their dearest friend in the faith was martyred last week, but they go to church and rejoice in their gracious God. They leave church and go into their world manifesting, more than anything else--of all things--hope. Such a mindset begs to be questioned! Nothing in the dynamics of this lesson happens unless and until we live our hope through whatever is going on around us. We live it so obviously that people notice and are amazed, so much so that they ask us to explain our hope. Never fear, they won't ask you to explain your gloom. But, if you show godly hope in Christ through the darkest days of your life, you'll get the questions. And Peter instructs you to "...be ready to answer..." those questions.

...with meekness and fear. The way we answer questions about our hope will either invite people to investigate further, perhaps even embrace the faith themselves, or it will turn them off and encourage them to walk away. The boastful, pushy, know-it-all attitude in believers seldom attracts people to the faith. How do you answer these questions effectively and with substance, but in the spirit of meekness and fear? Our attitude in responding is not an optional issue for Peter. He didn't tell us to answer in any way that we find comfortable and suitable to our personality. How many times have we seen sincere Christians respond to questions with a bad attitude? When questioned about the obvious turn-off of their attitude, they respond, "Well, that is the way I am. Take it or leave it." Peter's lesson drives home the reality of Biblical faith, even to the attitude that we manifest to people when we engage them in conversation about our faith. If we apply the wise words of Solomon to our Christianity, a soft answer turns away wrath. (Proverbs 15:1) It melts the wrath and nudges the angry person to reconsider. A wrathful or harsh answer enflames wrath in those to whom we speak. Ask yourself the simple--and obvious--question. When you talk to someone about your faith, do you truly want to influence them to give serious consideration to your faith, or do you want to torch their wrong ideas and send them packing? Do you hope to win them to the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, or do you want to win the argument? Our attitude is no less a part of our obligation to follow Jesus' example than our words or our actions. In fact, attitude is an action, is it not?

Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ. A good conscience means that you bear sincere and credible testimony to those who ask you for a reason for your hope. In fact, Peter's whole point is that your sincere lifestyle initiates the question regarding your hope. Your speech, your attitude, and your conduct harmoniously testify to your hope in Christ. Unbelievers often highlight the hypocrisy of Christians as the reason for their rejection of the faith. I've known a number of couples over the years in which one person was a believer, and the other was not. In several of these cases, the believing partner's godly life eventually overcame the other partner's objections to the faith. When an unbeliever who happens to be married to a faithful believer criticizes Christians as all being phony hypocrites, he/she must explain the authentic, sincere faith of that godly partner in marriage. In fact, Peter makes this point regarding a husband and wife. (1 Peter 3:1-6)

What a thrill it is to observe the godly believer who takes Jesus' example to heart and strives to live it, all of it, as closely as possible. You see no pretentious ego in their faith. They live and breathe for the benefit and blessing of those around them. They are unselfish to the core. I once read of a country preacher who built a convincing reputation in his community for never speaking badly of others. However difficult the task, he always managed to find something kind to say about people. When the community example of human depravity died, some of this man's friends wondered how he would manage to stick to his habit regarding this man. When they saw him, they mentioned this man and asked the preacher what he had to say about the wicked man. The preacher bowed his head for some time in thoughtful reflection. Finally, he looked up and said, "Well, he could whistle a good tune."

The most convincing Christian is not the arrogant, over-bearing, high-pressure salesman Christian. It is the winsome Christian who takes Jesus' example seriously, who practices Jesus' life and words. We'll never cause someone to pause and ask about our hope with a pushy attitude. You can find opinionated over-bearing people in every arena of life. We've seen quite enough of that attitude in our country's political activities during the last year, haven't we? According to Peter, we only gain the honor of explaining our hope when our godly, gracious life gives pause to those who know us, nudging them to ask us about our hope. We all need to pause on a regular basis and examine our feet and our attitudes. Do our words and actions invite the question, or do they invite those who observe us to avoid us? Do people want to know more about our faith, or ignore it? Our attitude and actions incite their questions. Have we so lived as to invite the right question?

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor