

Sermon for May 21, 2017 – Easter 6

1 Peter 3:15 (EHV)

Theme: How to Remain Christian in the World

- 1) Regard Christ as holy in your heart.
- 2) Be prepared to give an answer for your hope.

¹⁵But regard the Lord, the Christ, as holy in your hearts. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is in you. (EHV)

Being a Christian isn't easy. We must fight for our faith everyday of our lives. Why? Because the world is constantly enticing or threatening us away from Christ. Popular TV shows, movies, books and music seem to all promote and "anything goes" morality – claiming that you are answerable to no one but yourself. Teachers and employers might tell us to keep quiet about our faith – all the while preaching to us how we need to accept and affirm everyone's beliefs and lifestyles. Unchurched friends might mock us for our faith - telling us to get with the times and be like them: unshackled to archaic rules and free to live however they want. Yes, it isn't easy being a Christian in this day and age. Isn't this why so many seem to fall away during their high-school and college years?

This is why you would do well to listen to the advice Peter offers us in our sermon text for today. **How do you remain a Christian in the world?** 1) Regard Christ as holy in your heart. 2) Be prepared to give an answer for your hope.

Part One: Regard Christ as holy in your heart.

Our sermon text is part of a letter Peter wrote to encourage Christians who faced all sorts of slander and persecution for their faith. Some were being called traitors to the Jewish religion. Others were called atheists because they refuse to deny Christ and worship Roman gods. So many false reports and rumors were being spread that people viewed Christianity with suspicion. As you can see, we are not the only generation of Christians to face surmounting societal pressure to give up on our faith. The early Christians felt it every bit as much as we.

For this reason the Holy Spirit inspired Peter to write the words of our text. He wants us to understand that the pressure we feel from the world is, sadly, normal. Why? Because the unbelieving world hates Christ. Jesus once said: *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you."*ⁱ

If this is the case (and it most certainly is) how do we keep our faith in Christ amidst all the pressure we feel to give it up? The apostle Peter tells us: *regard the Lord, the Christ, as holy in your hearts.*

In order to understand what Peter means, we should define the word "holy." Based on the way it is used in our text, it means "to set apart as special." In other words, Peter wants you to set Jesus apart from all the other things your heart desires. He is to be your special treasure, guide and compass in life, whom you love and listen to above all else.

And why are you to give Jesus the number one place in your heart? Because he is the LORD: the one and only God, who created the vast universe in which we live. He is the all-powerful one to whom everyone must answer, but he himself is answerable to no one. He is the all-righteous, all-knowing, all-just God against whose commandments we sin day after day. Because of this we deserve his everlasting wrath and punishment of hell.

But Jesus is not only your almighty Creator LORD, he is also your Savior-LORD: the sinless Christ who (as Peter points out just a few verses later) came into our world to suffer and die for all your sins in order to bring you to God. And why did Jesus do this? Not because any of us had earned or deserved it, but simply for his mercy's sake. God loves you so much that he adopted you as his dearly loved child through the waters of holy baptism. He promises to work in all things - even the painful and evil things you experience - for your eternal good.

Believe these truths. Turn away from sin and turn to Jesus for forgiveness, life and salvation. Grow in your knowledge of Christ and his will for your life, and you will remain safe from all the evil forces that try to tear you away from him.

And how can you grow in your knowledge of Christ? By prayerfully studying his Word – both alone and with fellow Christians – and by making use of the sacraments He has given his Church. Through these means God strengthens our faith in him as we meditate on his wonderful grace. By remaining in the Word you remain in Christ – as He himself once said: *Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.* ²⁵ *The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.*ⁱⁱ

But what if you approach life with the attitude: "I don't need to attend Bible Class or Church. I'm strong enough in my faith and know well enough to avoid the dangers that threaten my soul. I pray and that's good enough." Well, then the other thing Jesus said will come true of you: ²⁶ . . . *everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.* ²⁷ *The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Brothers and sisters in Christ: *regard the Lord, the Christ, as holy in your hearts.* Keep growing in your knowledge and faith in him by being in his Word. Understand who he is and who you are in relationship to him. More importantly understand the great love he has for you: how he has redeemed you from all sin and promises to work in all things for your eternal good. Build your life upon His Word, and He will keep you from falling victim to all the forces that are trying to undermine your faith. He will also give you the gifts necessary for you to faithfully witness His love to others so that they too might be saved.

Part Two: Be prepared to give an answer for your hope.

Having encouraged us to set apart Christ Jesus as the LORD of our hearts, Peter now encourages us to put our faith into action. He says: *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is in you.*

Now understand Peter's words correctly. He is not saying that you need to have an answer for every question and accusation the unbelieving world throws at you regarding Scripture. No, he said that you should always *be prepared to give . . . a reason for the hope that is in you.* In other words, God wants you to be ready to answer people who ask you why you believe in Jesus. Why do you follow Christ – looking to him for forgiveness, mercy and salvation? Why do you personally hold on to Christ in the face of all the temptations and pressures you experience to give him up? What is your Christian hope and why is it so dear to you that it directs every aspect of your life?

These are questions you should always be ready to answer. Why? For two reasons.

First of all, if you don't know why you follow Jesus, you will stop following him. If your faith is merely based on the fact that you "grew up Lutheran," then you really don't have faith. Why do I say that? Because our faith in Christ is not merely some custom or tradition. It is living and active - possessing real value and offering us real hope for every aspect of our lives.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit promises to use our personal witness of the hope we have in Christ to lead others to faith. Winning debate points with convincing arguments rarely brings a person to Christ. A loving witness, however – one that seeks to share the deep, personal reasons why Jesus is important to us, is often heard. Such a witness does not try to conquer, but share. You are not telling people why they should believe in Jesus, but why you believe in Jesus. And who knows: maybe the person to whom you witness is facing similar problems. Hearing the reasons you follow Jesus will encourage them to consider their situation and the hope Christ has for them.

True, some will mock both us and our reasons for following Christ. But others will listen. They might not believe right away, but the seed of faith will have been planted. God will cause it to sprout in his good and gracious time.

Always be prepared . . . to give a reason for the hope that is in you. Do you wonder why Peter encourages us to "prepare" for this? Aren't we just talking about our personal faith? Why would we need to prepare for that?

Because the devil, world and our sinful nature are constantly trying to get us to forget both about Christ and our need for salvation. Too many times we go through the motions of religion without truly meditating on what and why we believe. Because this is the case, questions about our personal faith can catch us off guard. Worse yet, if we aren't prepared to give an answer concerning our hope, we might begin to wonder about it ourselves. Is our Christian faith really that important? Does it really give my life true purpose and meaning?

This is why it is of the utmost importance to *always be prepared* to give a reason for the hope that is in you. Our preparation not only gives us opportunity to share the Gospel, but also to be strengthened in it as well.

And how do we prepare to share our hope with others? By constantly meditating on God's Word ourselves. The hope the Bible offers us is unique. We can't learn about the greatness of God's love from any other source. This is why we are constantly encouraged to study and meditate on God's Word – ever digging to find out more about who our LORD is and what he has done for us.

Let me ask you a question: do you grow in love for, and get better at, a hobby; by only participating in it occasionally, or all the time? I think we know the answer: the more we practice and harder we work, the better we get and appreciate the hobby we profess to love.

The same is true regarding our hope in Christ: the more we meditate and rejoice upon God's wonderful work for us, the more we appreciate it and grow in love for him. This is how we prepare to give others an answer concerning the hope we have – thereby also strengthening our own faith against all the hostility we face in the world as Christians.

Brothers and sisters in Christ. The unbelieving world is doing its best to separate us from Christ. How can we stand firm and remain Christian in the World? St. Peter tells us: *regard Christ as holy in your heart and be prepared to give an answer for your hope*. In other words, be in God's Word – always applying his promises to your life. Then you will stand as a light house on a rock – weathering every storm and directing people to the same salvation we enjoy in Christ. Amen.

ⁱ John 15:18-19 NIV84

ⁱⁱ Matthew 7:24-25 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 7:26-27 NIV84