

## 1 Peter 3:13–14a

### Introduction

Over the last several weeks, the Apostle Peter has been showing us how we're to live in relationship to the unbelieving, and sometimes hostile world around us. (2:11-3:12) And now, as we move into the next section, Peter introduces it with some words that might surprise us at first and even sound completely wrong.

**I. 1 Peter 3:13** — Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?

When Peter asks this question, he's assuming that *IN SOME SENSE* there will be *no one* to harm us *if* we are zealous (literally, *if* we are “zealots”) for doing what is good. But hasn't Peter been making the complete opposite point all along – that sometimes those who do good *will be* “spoken against” (1 Pet. 2:12) and “reviled” and treated with evil intent (3:9) and maybe even beaten? (2:20) Hasn't Peter already said that our “calling” is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus' who patiently endured suffering? (2:21) In chapter four, Peter will say that we shouldn't be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon us to test us, as though something strange were happening to us. (cf. 4:6) So how can Peter say here: “Who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good”?

One possible solution is that Peter is thinking of ultimate harm.<sup>1</sup> If we're zealous for doing what is good, then we'll experience the Lord's blessing and favor on our lives (cf. 3:10-12, 14); and who is there, then, who can ultimately do us any harm? This is certainly a mindset and a way of thinking that we should all have.

- Matthew 10:28 — Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.
- Romans 8:31 — If God is for us, who can be against us?

We can be confident and secure in the ultimate safety and well-being of our souls. This should be a constant source of comfort, and joy, and courage for every single one of us every single day of our lives. But is it really what Peter's saying here in verse 13? I don't believe it is.

In this context, the Greek seems to have the meaning: “Who is there to **persecute or mistreat** you if you are a zealot for what is good?”<sup>2</sup> But isn't the answer: “All sorts of people”? Isn't this

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Achtemeier, Watson, Clowney, Michaels, Schreiner, Kistemaker, Lange, Blum, Gospel Transformation Bible, Reformation Study Bible, ESV Study Bible

<sup>2</sup> In verse 9, Peter says: “Do not repay evil [*kakos*] for evil [*kakos*].” Peter is talking about evil *treatment* of others. Don't **treat** someone else badly just because they **treat** you badly. In verses 10-11, he says, “Whoever desires to love life and see good days... let him *turn away from evil* [*kakos*] and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it.” Once again, the meaning is this: “If you want to see good, don't do evil to others – don't **treat** others spitefully and meanly.” And then in verse 12, “The face of the Lord is against those who do evil [*kakos*].” The face of the Lord is against those who do evil to others – who insult and revile others – even if it's only in response to being first insulted and reviled by them. Here in verse 13, when Peter says, “Who is there to **harm** you?”, he uses the verb *kakoo*. We could translate literally: “Who is the one who will do evil to you?” Or, *in this context*, “Who is the one

exactly the kind of thing we're supposed to be expecting? To be a Christian means to suffer, right? So if you're not suffering in some way, you're really not being a good Christian, right? And what I think Peter's saying here is, "wrong!" This is not a biblical way of thinking about suffering.

Ever since the middle of chapter two Peter's been urging us all to be doing the kind of "good" that even the Gentiles recognize to be "good."

- 1 Peter 2:12 — Keep your conduct among the Gentiles good, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

When it comes to being yoked together with unbelievers, Paul can say that we have absolutely zero common ground:

- 2 Corinthians 6:14 — Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? [None at all!]

But when it comes to letting our light shine before unbelievers, Peter says that we do share a common ground in the knowledge—and even the approval—of what is "good." It's only because we have this "common ground" with unbelievers that Peter can write in the very next verses:

- 1 Peter 2:13–15 — Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him **to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good**. For this is the will of God, that **by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people**.

What Peter's talking about here is the power of good to actually overcome evil. (cf. Rom. 12:21; Goppelt on 3:13) So, when Christian slaves submit to their masters and Christian wives submit to their husbands—when they do what is "good" not only in the eyes of God, but also in the eyes of the Gentiles (in Graeco-Roman culture)—they give their unbelieving masters and husbands **no legitimate reason** to persecute or mistreat them, and therefore it's far **less likely** that they *will* be persecuted or mistreated.<sup>3</sup> One commentator says, "Zealousness for the good robs opponents of any real reason for mean treatment of the readers; as in the case of Jesus, who constantly went about dispensing good, some other reason for mean treatment will have to be trumped up." (Lenski) And even when these slanders and false accusations *are* "trumped up," our constant zeal for what is good and our refusal even to return evil for evil might still "put to silence the ignorance of foolish people" (2:15; 3:16; cf. 2:12), or it could even result in their salvation. (cf. 3:1)

---

who will treat you wrongly and spitefully? Who is the one who will persecute you and say evil things against you?" (Cf. Every other occurrence of this verb in the New Testament [Acts 7:6, 19; 12:1; 14:2; 18:10])

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Grudem, Jobes, Goppelt, Calvin, Lenski, NASB Study Bible, Zondervan NIV Study Bible, Geneva Study Bible "Peter is not arguing syllogistically, but proverbially. If one behaves in the fashion Peter describes above, he or she will likely not excite the enmity and anger of others. Who indeed would harm such a person? But the next verse brings in a complementary statement: While none, even under their own (pagan) codes of proper conduct, will have grounds for harming Christians, some Christians will suffer. Our verse, then, is a transition from the idea of minimizing suffering through virtue to a renewed teaching of how to behave when one suffers anyway." (Davids)

Are you seeing how very, very concerned Peter is that we should all be careful to be doing what's "good" in the eyes of Gentiles and unbelievers? And so on the flip side, he's equally concerned that we never, ever endure any mistreatment for doing what even Gentiles would call "evil."

- 1 Peter 2:20 — What credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure?
- 1 Peter 3:17 — It is better to suffer for doing good, *if* that should be God's will, than for doing evil.
- 1 Peter 4:15 — Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.

So now I think we have the key to reading our verse this morning: "Who is the one to persecute and mistreat you—*if* you are zealous for what is good?" I don't think we're meant to read this so much as an encouragement and a comfort, but rather as a call to examine ourselves. If I'm ever being mistreated or persecuted by the world, the first thing I need to make sure of is that *I* haven't provided any reason for this mistreatment by doing any evil myself or by in any way misrepresenting the cause of Christ. I need to make sure that I haven't even responded to evil with evil or to reviling with reviling. If the world is never going to mistreat me for doing what even the world itself calls good, then if I'm constantly zealous for doing that good, the only real path to persecution will be "trumped up" charges, and slanders, and lies. (2:12, 3:9, 16; 4:4, 14) Think, for example, of the prophets in the OT, and of Jesus Himself, and of Stephen and Paul in the book of Acts. In light of all this, then, who is there to harm us—if we are zealous for doing what is good? Answer: Only the one who lies, or slanders, or accuses us falsely. Only the one who has absolutely zero legitimate reason to do so. And what this means practically is that in a world still restrained to various extents by God's common grace (cf. 2:14; 1 Tim. 2:1-2), persecution and mistreatment should not be—as a general rule—our regular, or our constant expectation.

"Now who is there to persecute and mistreat you—*if you are zealous for what is good?*" *Are* we *truly zealous* for doing what is good? *Are* we constantly and in every way adorning the doctrines of the Gospel with a life that is blameless and above all reproach? (cf. Titus 2:10) *Are* we always giving a good name to Christianity by constantly taking thought for what is good in the sight of all people? And then look what Peter goes on to say in verse 14:

**II. 1 Peter 3:14a** — But<sup>4</sup> **even *if*** you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed.

In grammar, verbs have different "moods." So in Greek we have the indicative mood where the verb feels like just saying how things are ("I went to the store"). Then there's the imperative mood where the verb just feels like giving orders ("go to the store!"). There's the subjunctive mood where the verb feels like deciding something or encouraging others to do something ("let us go to the store"). And finally, there's the optative mood where the verb is feeling very unsure and uncertain ("I might possibly go to the store"). That last (optative) mood is rare (only 68x's in

---

<sup>4</sup> Those who interpret the first half of this verse as referring to "ultimate" harm done to the soul must give the Greek *alla* a different sense than its usual adversative sense ("but"). For example, Michaels says that *alla* is functioning here in a confirming sense: "**What is more**, even if..." or, "**No**, even if..." Schreiner says that *alla* is used in a clarifying sense and translates, "**Indeed**, even if..." However, the normal adversative sense of *alla* should at least encourage us to look for any way that this meaning might fit with the surrounding context.

the entire New Testament) and yet Peter uses it twice in our passage this morning. So we could translate here: “But even *if* you should *possibly* suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed.” And then if we skip to verse 17: “It is better to suffer for doing good, *if* that should *possibly* or *potentially* be God’s will, than for doing evil.”

So, what in the world is Peter’s point with this optative mood? Some think he’s saying that suffering is an unlikely and remote possibility. (cf. Grudem; Kistemaker) But the rest of the letter seems to assume the opposite – that either some of them already are suffering, or else they’re waiting for a suffering that could break out at any time.<sup>5</sup> (cf. 5:9-10) The Bible never encourages us to think of suffering as only an unlikely and remote possibility. This is especially important for *us* to remember, who live in America. Jesus said to His disciples:

- John 15:18–20 (cf. 16:33) — If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.

Paul says in 2 Timothy:

- 2 Timothy 3:12 (1 Thess. 3:1-4) — All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Living holy and godly lives in an ungodly world is bound, at times, to result in opposition and persecution of some kind or another. This persecution “[might be greater or lesser] and take different forms in different countries and [at] different [times], but the basic hostility of the world to the godly man remains unchanged.” (Hiebert, quoted in Lea and Griffin; NAC) After all, “What partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?” This explains why Peter can say in chapter four:

- 1 Peter 4:12 — Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

The Bible never encourages us to think of suffering as only an unlikely and remote possibility. But now here’s the flip side of the coin that we need to maintain in perfect balance and tension: Neither does the Bible encourage us to always expect that persecution is just around the corner or that somehow suffering should be our normal everyday experience as Christians. This is because of God’s “common grace” (general vs. saving). It’s because there is a basic common ground between the Christian and the unbeliever in our definitions of what is “good.” So then, who is there to persecute us and mistreat us—*if* we’re truly “zealots” for doing what is good? Answer: **Only** the one who lies, or slanders, or accuses us falsely.

And now with Peter’s optative, he’s just emphasizing the same thing again – that we should never see suffering as something “inevitable” or resign ourselves to persecution as somehow the

---

<sup>5</sup> Some give *pascho* (“suffer”), here, the specific sense of martyrdom. Peter would be saying, then, that in the case of his readers, *dying* for their faith was still only a remote and unlikely possibility. However, Peter’s use of *pascho* elsewhere in his letter mitigates strongly against this interpretation. (cf. 4:1-2, 12-19; 5:8-10)

Christian's way of life.<sup>6</sup> (cf. Davids; Goppelt) Instead, Peter says we should always be living in such a way as to make persecution and mistreatment the least likely of a reality as it can possibly be. Does that sound strange to us? That's not to say that we compromise with the world, or hide our Christian witness, or minimize the offense of the Gospel, but it is to say exactly what Paul says to all of us as Christians in Romans chapter 12:

- Romans 12:17–18 — Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is good in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Here again, we see that we're never to do anything that could ever give the world any legitimate reason to persecute us or speak evil against us as Christians – those who carry about with us always the name of Christ. So, for example, when a collection was taken from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia to help the church in Jerusalem, Paul said that he would only take it to Jerusalem accompanied by several others who were known as men of integrity. And then he explained in 2 Corinthians 8:

- 2 Corinthians 8:20–21 — We take this course [we go this extra mile] so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, for we aim at what is good not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man. [including Gentile unbelievers]<sup>7</sup>

Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:

- 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12 — Aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders.

Are we always diligently conscientious and purposeful about the testimony we maintain before the unbelievers and the Gentiles that are all around us? There is a sense in which it does matter what people think. There is a sense in which we should be concerned about the opinions of others – even the opinion of the world. This is what it looks like to live wisely as sojourners and foreigners in this world.

---

<sup>6</sup> “Such protection from fatalistic resignation may be needed especially for those in the church who are too quick to paint themselves as martyrs and who construe every slight offense as an act of persecution. While persecution for Christ is [always] a potentially real danger... it is not to be expected at every turn.” (Jobes)  
Among the other proposed explanations for the optative, the most natural sense of the optative may be more or less upheld.

“The purpose of the optative... is not to suggest that suffering is unlikely. Rather, the optative is used because suffering, though not a constant experience in the Christian life, is always a threat and could erupt at any time. Peter was not teaching that suffering is rare, only that it is not perpetual.” (Schreiner; cf. Achtemeier; Lange)

“The use of this construction (optative) points to the fact that suffering is not the expected outcome of zeal for good.” (Blum)

“The optative serves to strengthen the rhetorical device by which Peter encourages his readers: the beatitude of v 14 and the *Tobspruch* of v 17. Those who do good are “blessed” *even* in suffering; their lot is “better” than that of evildoers *even* when the will of God permits those evildoers to oppress them.” (Michaels)

<sup>7</sup> “[Paul] can *accept* being held in ill-repute (6:8; 1 Cor 4:10), [but] he does not *welcome* dishonor and will do *nothing* to warrant it... The gospel may be scandalous, but his behavior and sincerity must be exemplary to both believers *and* unbelievers.” (Garland; emphasis mine)

Peter says we're to live in such a way as to make persecution and mistreatment the least likely of a reality for us as it can possibly be. Listen to what Paul said to Timothy:

- 1 Timothy 2:1-2 — First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

Notice that the goal of praying for our government leaders is so that we might lead peaceful and quiet lives; in other words, lives that are as much as possible free from persecution and conflict with the world around us. But as with Peter, this isn't the *end* goal of praying for our leaders. The *end* goal of peaceful and quiet lives is lives that are "godly and dignified in every way." One commentator explains that what we're really praying for is "an ideal set of social circumstances [a peaceful and quiet life] *in which* [we can] give unfettered expression to [our] faith in observable [Christian] living." (Towner; NICNT) What's the benefit of a peaceful and quiet life? It should be a Christian witness and light that shines out all the brighter. (cf. 1 Tim. 2:3-4) But how often is our "peaceful and quiet life" only an excuse for complacency and apathy – rather than zealously doing good? There's truth in the old saying that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." (Tertullian) But the Bible also teaches us to pray for a government that will punish those who do evil and praise those who do good so that as a people who are always "zealots" for doing what is good, we might live peaceful and quiet lives. Are we diligently making the most of these days of "peace and quiet"? Are we using these days as the ideal opportunity to give unfettered expression to our Christian faith in observable Christian living?

In a letter where one of the main themes is persecution and suffering, look how careful Peter to guard us against any kind of "martyr complex." What is a martyr complex? It's really a kind of thinking that minimizes any common ground between us and the unbelievers around us. It's a kind of thinking that emphasizes almost exclusively that there is no partnership or fellowship between light and darkness. It's pessimism versus a biblical kind of "optimism." And so in this way of thinking, the world becomes only something to be endured rather than something to be won. The world becomes only something to be resisted rather than something to be conquered with good and for good. The world becomes only a means to our own refinement and our own heavenly inheritance rather than something that stands desperately in need of our kindness and compassion and the message of the Gospel. When the "martyr complex" starts seeping in, we'll no longer be as motivated to always be zealots for what is good in the sight of all people – even in the sight of Gentiles and unbelievers.<sup>8</sup> We begin to think subconsciously to ourselves: "To be a Christian means to suffer, right? So if we're not being persecuted in some way, then something must be wrong, right? So how much does it really matter what name I give to Christianity?" It's this "martyr complex" that Peter is so very intent on destroying.

There's a big difference between expecting suffering as something always inevitable and being ready for suffering (and never surprised at suffering) as something that's always possible. And even when we are suffering (2:12), we still always respond in the real hope and prayer of overcoming that evil with good – the good that even our persecutors must recognize as good. An excellent principle to remember here is this: If I would in any way feel like a hypocrite

---

<sup>8</sup> "[Peter] emphasizes the openness of the situation in order to protect the Church from fatalistic resignation and to encourage it toward a positive form of conduct in the sense of the principle advanced in 2:12." (Goppelt)

witnessing to a person after how I've spoken to them or treated them, then I've done what is evil (likely even what is evil in the eyes of the world) rather than what is good. (cf. 1 Pet. 3:15-17)

**III. 1 Peter 3:13-14a** — Now who is there to persecute and mistreat you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed.

What does it mean when we've done everything we possibly can to pursue what is good (and we still are)—when we've even been “zealots” for what is good (and we still are)—and even after all this we're still persecuted and mistreated, and slandered, and reviled? Should we be discouraged? Should we be disillusioned? Should we feel like failures? Peter's point, here, is that exactly the opposite is true, because **now** we **know** that we truly are being persecuted **only** for righteousness' sake. That, for Peter—and for us—is the absolute key.

Brothers and sisters: “Who is there to persecute and mistreat us if we are zealous for what is good?” Answer: Only the one who lies, or slanders, or accuses us falsely. Only the one who has absolutely zero legitimate reason to do so. And therein lies our joy – joy in a conscience that is wholly pure and clean before God. (cf. 2 Cor. 1:12; 2 Tim. 1:3) Suffering that truly is only “for righteousness' sake”—persecution that can only be based in slander and false accusations—is a powerful confirmation of our clear conscience before God. It testifies loudly and clearly to a life that truly is blameless and above all reproach. And this is the life, we know, that our Lord Himself has promised to bless. (1 Pet. 3:10-12)

When Peter wrote this part of his letter, he almost certainly had in mind the words of Jesus in Matthew chapter five:

- Matthew 5:10–12 — **Blessed** are those who are persecuted **for righteousness' sake**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. **Blessed** are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you *falsely* on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Brothers and sisters, “who is there to persecute and mistreat you—*if* you are zealous for what is good? But *even if* you should suffer **for righteousness' sake** [*if* that should be God's will], **you are blessed**.”