

Title: Christian Atheism
Text: 1 Peter 1:13-19
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Over the last month we have been reflecting on the privilege and responsibility we have, in the words of Peter, to give reason for the hope we have in Jesus Christ. Christianity is a missionary faith and everyone who claims that Christ is Lord is a missionary, without exception.

In the first week one we explored the 'why' of sharing our faith – that we are commissioned by Jesus to make disciples, we are compelled by the urgency of so many in our world facing and experiencing spiritual death and we are captivated by the wonder of God's love for us.

In the second week we began to explore the 'how' of evangelism – that we plant seeds of faith with our presence, patience, prayer, proclamation and our passion.

In week three Ralph shared how when our story intersects with the story of others and, most particularly with God's salvation story, then new faith is not only possible, but highly likely.

I want to finish our series today on a more sobering note. I want to go back to the 'why' question, but ask it from a different perspective. Why is it that if evangelism is so central to Christian faith that there are so few professing Christians telling others about Jesus? Why, even when we share the Good News, are so many people simply ignoring what we have to say?

These are big questions with many answers. Today I want to focus on one important barrier to effective evangelism – perhaps the biggest barrier. It is the lack of congruency between what Christians say they believe and how they act. Brennan Manning put it this way:

The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians, who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, then walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.
(Brennan Manning)

Craig Groeshell has said that the church today is filled with Christian Atheists – people who believe all the right things about God but effectively live as if he doesn't exist. Christian Atheists deafen the world to the life-saving message of Jesus.

The recent survey in the United States asked non-Christians if they had any friendships with Christians. 84% said they had at least one committed Christian friend. Of that 84%, only 15% said they noticed any significant difference in lifestyle between their Christian friend and other non-Christian friends they had.

Some missionaries were being taught Chinese before they left for the mission field. The very first day of class the teacher entered the room and, without saying a word, walked down every row of students. Finally, still without saying a word, she walked out of the room again. Then she came back and addressed the class. "Did you notice anything special about me?" she asked. Nobody could think of anything in particular. One student finally raised her hand. "I noticed that you had on a very lovely perfume," she said. The class chuckled. But the teacher said, "That was exactly the point. [It] will be a long time before any of you will be able to speak Chinese well enough to share the gospel with anyone in China. But even before you are able to do that, you can minister the aroma of Christ to these people by the quality of your lives."

When an unbelieving world hears our message they look to our lives to see if how we live matches what we say. We are called to be immersed in this broken world that God loves, but not to be of it. Our greatest testimony to an unbelieving world won't necessarily be what we say, but how we live.

The Apostle Peter wrote to churches who lived in a hedonistic culture antagonistic to the gospel. To be a Christian was to literally risk your life and that of your family, as it still is in many parts of our world. Let's all stand as we here how Peter challenges and encourages them:

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

(1 Peter 1:13-19)

The passage begins with 'therefore'. I have said on numerous occasions that 'therefore' is one of the most significant and dangerous words in the Bible. It is a word that links two passages together. So before we go forward, we must look back. In the first 12 verses of 1 Peter, the Apostle beautifully illustrates the hope the church has because of what God has done in and through Jesus Christ. 'Therefore' tells his hearers that in light of what God has done there is a response that we should offer. As always, God has taken the initiative. And as always, we are called to respond. Theology leads to ethics. Right thinking about God should lead to right behavior for God. What we truly believe will shape how we really behave.

Peter calls for us to Be Prepared.

His first command is to 'prepare your minds for action.' The original Greek is literally translated here as 'gird up the loins of your minds.' In the ancient world the common dress was to wear a long outer tunic. Before a person could run or move quickly that would literally have to hitch up their tunic and tuck it into their belt so that they would not trip over. Peter is saying, get ready for action, be ready to run the race of faith. Be prepared, be vigilant. Roll up the sleeves of your mind and get to work. The grammar here is clear; do this not once, but repeatedly – day by day.

Peter knows that the church he writes to are immersed in a world that is hostile to the Christian gospel. If Christian believers are to thrive in such an environment then they must prepare their minds for action. Like an athlete trains continuously for a race or a soldier lives in a continual state of preparation for war, a follower of Jesus should daily renew and strengthen their mind in the Spirit's power.

At the first practice for a new season, the coach of the UCLA basketball, John Wooden, would set the tone for the long season to come.

Veteran players knew what was coming. But first year players were perplexed by the initial lesson give by their coach: He taught them how to put on a pair of socks. He did not teach this lesson only once, but before every game and practice. Why?

Wooden discovered many players didn't properly smooth out wrinkles in the socks around their heels and little toes. If left uncorrected, these wrinkles could cause blisters that could hamper their performance at crucial times during games. Many players thought the practice odd and laughed about it then. Wooden knows some of them still laugh about it today. But the coach would not compromise on this basic fundamental principle: "I stuck to it. I believed in that, and I insisted on it."

Peter calls us to prepare our minds for action; to gird the loins of our mind, to roll up the sleeves of our mind, to pull up the socks of our mind. When you roll out of bed each morning is your mind prepared for action? Are you ready to enter the spiritual fray?

We prepare our mind for action with the slow, steady obedience of daily disciplines of prayer, bible reading, fellowship, mediation and so on.

Only as we prepare properly for the race of faith will we reach the finish line with breath in our lungs and joy in our hearts.

Peter calls us to Live Hopefully.

We prepare our minds for action as we:

Set (our) hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.
(1 Peter 1:13)

There are many things that we can place our hope in; money, power, relationships, career, the approval of others, social status, material comfort and so on. The truth is that any hope or reward we receive from these things is temporary. We will lose it all when we die. Peter is saying place orientate your life towards eternal things – in particular the eternal reward we receive when we stand before Jesus in heaven.

The Bible is clear that every human being who has ever lived will one day stand before the judgment seat of Christ:

For we all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for all the things while done in the body, whether good or bad.
(2 Corinthians 5:10)

Our entry into eternal life will be based solely on whether we have placed our faith in Jesus and what he did for us on the cross. A central doctrine of the Christian faith is that we are saved – judged worthy and enter eternal life - by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. We cannot earn our way into heaven by racking up a long list of good deeds.

While we are not saved by our good works, we are saved for good works – that is to glorify God with our service. And the New Testament says that Christians who enter into eternal life will receive a crown or reward in heaven that is commensurate with the good works they have offered God. Paul says this in Romans:

God will give to each person according to what he has done.
(Romans 2:6)

How this reward is given and experienced is a mystery. What is not is Peter saying that our motivation in this life should be our reward in the next life. Scott McKnight puts it this way:

Peter wants churches to maintain a loose grip on this world and a tight grip on the world to come.
(Scott McKnight)

Paul Brand was a brilliant and famous doctor, surgeon and author who gave his life to serving people disfigured by leprosy. He was an old man when he was asked to speak at the dedication of a new retirement home that he would be one of the first residents in. This is what he said:

I remember well when I was at my physical peak. I was 27 years old and had just finished medical school. A group of friends and I were mountain climbing, and we could climb for hours. For some people, when they cross that peak, for them life is over.

I remember well my mental peak, too. I was 57 years of age and was performing groundbreaking hand surgery. All of my medical training was coming together in one place. For some people, when they cross this peak, for them life is over.

I'm now over 80 years of age. I recently realized I'm approaching another peak—my spiritual peak. All I have sought to become as a person has the opportunity to come together in wisdom, maturity, kindness, love, joy, and peace. And I realize when I cross that peak, for me, life will not be over; it will have just begun.

We are called to live in, but not of this world with our eyes fixed firmly on the crown of the greater world to come. This leads to Peter's next challenge:

Peter calls us to Pursue Holiness.

As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."
(1 Peter 1:14-16)

The world holy is translated from the Greek word 'hagios', which literally means 'separated out' for someone or something. Peter is saying that we should be separated out from the world for God.

We become holy as we refuse to allow the world to squeeze us into its mold, instead allowing the Holy Spirit to transform us more and more into the likeness of Jesus. Holiness requires us to daily turn away from sin and daily turn towards God.

Our transformation into the likeness of Jesus doesn't just happen when we see God in heaven; this transformation begins the moment we place our faith in Jesus and continues every moment of every day until the day we die and pass into eternity. We become holy as our will and commitment cooperates with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

We cannot become holy apart from the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit cannot work in us apart from our will.

Don Carson puts it this way:

People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith.
(D.A. Carson)

We don't drift into holiness, we pursue it. And we pursue holiness as we ruthlessly deal with sin in our lives.

Let me be clear; God hates sin. God hates what sin does to us. God's holy character is offended by sin. If we say we love God and want to honor him with our lives we will pursue holiness and we do we will declare all out war on sin in our own lives. Billy Sunday was a colorful evangelist of the early 1900's. He said this:

I'm against sin. I'll kick it as long as I've got a foot. I'll fight it as long as I've got a fist. I'll butt it as long as I've got a head. And I'll bite it as long as I've got a tooth, and when I'm old, fistless, footless and toothless, I'll gum it till I go home to glory and it goes home to perdition.
(Billy Sunday)

Let me get a little personal. It seems to me that too many of us, including me too many times, have become complacent about sin. We make little compromises, take little short cuts and create little rationalizations that allow us to tolerate what we should never tolerate. There is a classic cartoon where two couples are in a Bible study, when one woman says:

Well, I haven't actually died to sin, but I did feel kind of faint once.

We are called to die to sin and live for Christ! God loves us, but he hates and detests sin. He finds sin abhorrent and offensive.

Aron Ralston was an adventurer who famously was rock climbing in a remote part of Utah when he pushed his arm into a crevice when a 400 kilogram bolder shifted, pinning his arm. He tried to chip away at the bolder with a dull pocket knife, without success. He tried using a dull pocketknife to chip away at the boulder—without success. He tried to rig a makeshift pulley with ropes to lift the boulder—that failed as well.

After three days, having gone through most of his three liters of water and his food, he decided to sacrifice his arm to save his life. First bending his body in order to break his wrist bone, he proceeded to use his knife to amputate his arm just below the right elbow, freeing him from the bolder and the canyon. If Ralston had stayed trapped in the canyon he would have died. A policeman, commenting on this incredible story of survival, offered a classic understatement, 'He had a will to live.'

Sin destroys life. Do we have the will to resolutely kill and destroy anything in us that is not of God? Do we have the will to live for Christ as we die to self?

Some of us have things in our life that, by the Spirit's power, we have to cut out. We begin that spiritual surgery as we confess our sin, seek God's forgiveness and the Holy Spirit's strength to resist future temptation.

Peter calls us to Fear God.

We prepare our minds for action as we fear God. Peter says this:

Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.
(1 Peter 1:17)

Fearing God is a sensitive and important issue. We don't fear God because God is some brutal tyrant. We fear God because unlike us, God is holy and perfect. We fear God because God is omniscient – all seeing, omnipresent – present everywhere, omnipotent – powerful beyond our imagining. Scott McKnight puts it this way:

This fear is neither dread nor anxiety; rather it is the healthy response of a human being before an altogether different kind of being.
(McKnight)

The healthy reverent fear of God arises when we realize that whatever we think or do is subject of the scrutiny of God's penetrating holiness and love.

Proverbs says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. I would add that the revering God as we should is the beginning of healing and wholeness in our lives, and paradoxically, the destruction of all other fears that enslave us – like the fear of rejection, the fear failure and even the big daddy of all fears, the fear of death. Oswald Chambers said it this way:

The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else.
(Oswald Chambers)

Peter calls us to Honor Jesus.

We prepare our minds for action as we live hopefully, pursue holiness, fear God and as we honor Jesus and his sacrifice. Peter says this:

You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

(1 Peter 1:18-19)

The life we have in Christ is valuable because it was purchased at great cost.

In 1868 Emperor Theodore III of Ethiopia had held a group of 53 European captives in a remote 9,000-foot-high bastion deep in the interior. England's Queen Victoria pleaded in vain with Theodore to release the captives. Finally, the government ordered a full-scale military expedition from India to march into Ethiopia—not to conquer the country and make it a British colony, but simply to rescue a tiny band of civilians.

The invasion force included 32,000 men, heavy artillery, and 44 elephants to carry the guns. Provisions included 50,000 tons of beef and pork and 30,000 gallons of rum. Engineers built landing piers, water treatment plants, a railroad, and telegraph line to the interior, plus many bridges. All of this to fight one decisive battle, after which the prisoners were released, and everyone packed up and went home. The British expended millions of pounds to rescue a handful of captives.

As staggering and expensive as this rescue mission was, it is puny, microscopic when compared with the price paid by God for our freedom from sin and death. Before our rescue we were enslaved by our own rebellion against God and facing certain death. But God bought our freedom, not with silver or gold or military force or shock and awe. He bought our freedom with the blood – the precious blood of his son, Jesus Christ.

While it costs us nothing, our freedom has been bought with a price beyond the boundaries of our imagination.

We have been freed from sin and death by the precious blood of Jesus.

Peter is asking us to honor the sacrifice that was made for us.

We do this as we prepare our minds for action, pursue holiness, fear God and seek eternal rather than temporary rewards.

Peter said to the church 2000 years ago and he says to us:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

(1 Peter 2:9)