

Sermon 1: 1 Peter 3:15-16: '...Being Prepared to Make a Defence...'

OUTLINE

Honouring Christ in our hearts
Answering for our hope
Living lives of holiness

INTRODUCTION

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor talks about these times of late modernity we live in as the twilight of the idols and the gods. Contrary to every prognostication and resistant to every attempt faith and religion continue to haunt us. The age of Christendom has come to end and the privileged position of unchallenged supremacy is lost to us. However, contrary to the hopes of the New Atheists religion is still with us. However, we now live in an age where there is no doubt without faith and no faith without doubt. This presents us with a double challenge. On the one hand we have an opportunity to address the mixed Neo Darwinian materialistic and humanistic/New Age/Therapeutic view on things coming to dominate modern society. Apologist Douglas Groothuis reports, 'Through hundreds of interviews over a period of twenty years, my students in Christian apologetics at Denver Seminary have found that people often hold a smorgasbord of beliefs that do not easily fit into a unified worldview. There may be a dash of Christianity (left over from Sunday School), heaps of New Age spirituality (for personal enrichment), a dose of naturalism (about scientific matters) and, of course substantial seasoning by relativism (which is everywhere).¹ This presents us with a ripe opportunity.

But we also have to shore up believers against the growing tirade of critiques, objections, questions, and challenges. Since 9/11 the outspoken vitriol against Christianity in particular has been astounding. Through the ability of instant information where we are seeing books published, debates aired, blogs written, social media disseminating opinion, we are constantly bombarded with the latest opinion and argument against Christianity. Objections which give rise to answers which give rise to counter-objections have amped up the pressure on the believer to give an answer for why they believe what they believe. The accusations against Christians today are legion. We are now seen as anti-social because we do not support the new gender equality push. We are branded as puritanical, judgemental, unloving, and intolerant. On the scientific front we are accused of dishonesty, obscurantism, being primitive, being enemies to education and truth. We are accused of harming our children by lying to them about matters of faith instead of allowing secular state policy driven schools to indoctrinate them with naturalistic views. We are accused of being chauvinistic, haters of women, abusers of children, hypocrites, that we institutionalise racism and on and on we could go.

This is why I feel the need for this series on apologetics. For those who don't know what apologetics is, it has nothing to do with saying sorry, it comes from the Greek word apologia which means to make a defence. I am deeply aware of the pressures modern Christians face and the need to equip them. It is my hope that through these series we will be able to shore up some of your doubts, to equip you to answer the tough questions, in particular we need to think of this sort of enterprise as an inoculation for our children. By exposing them to the main objections to the faith and looking honestly at them and attempting to answer

1 Douglas Groothuis, Christian Apologetics, p43.

them, this will prepare them before they meet the assault waiting for them at university or the work place.

Perhaps an outline of what to expect would be helpful. There are two main things to consider in the apologetic endeavour. Firstly, there are the objections. This includes every challenge to faith both historical and present. Secondly, there are those arguments for Christianity, this would include a discussion of all those things that go to showing that Christianity is true or at best reasonable. We will begin with the positive things that go to show how Christianity is in fact the truth. Then after setting forth all the reasons why it is right to believe, we will then turn to the objections and defend against them.

Today we are going to begin by looking at one of the classic apologetic texts, 1 Peter 3:15-16, 'but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.'

This is a very helpful text for us. Firstly, it is helpful because of when it was written and who it was written to. It was written by Peter to Christians who were being persecuted during the reign of Nero. It was not the open and direct persecution of Christians under Nero where he dipped them in tar and used them as lanterns in his garden. No it was an earlier form of persecution where more financial and social penalties were involved. This is helpful because Christianity was a minority religion in an antagonistic setting much like we are experiencing today. Peter's advice will be relevant to us for this reason. Secondly, many of the attitudes and accusations against these early Christians and Peter's tactics on how to respond are very fitting for us as well. Christians because they did not worship the Roman gods were seen as disturbers of the peace, part of the problem and not the cure for societal ills. They were slandered and falsely accused of all sorts of things that were not true. So as we look at our text today to help us negotiate our own response to the antagonistic unbelief we face we will see three things. More than just the single concern of trying to be smarter than the unbeliever, Peter directs us to three things necessary to our response, that we honour Christ as Lord in our hearts; that we have prepared answers for our hope; and that we follow up our confession with a holy life.

Honouring Christ in our hearts

'but in your hearts honour Christ as holy.' Peter is in the middle of a discussion about how to respond to unjust persecution. V14 says, 'But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.' He speaks about the blessing attending those who suffer for righteousness sake. And he calls them not to fear or be troubled. On the heels of that statement is our verse. We could summarise it neatly as 'don't fear man, fear God.'

This verse is taken from the thought in Isaiah 8:12-13, "'Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread.¹³ But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.' These words of Isaiah were written to Israel when they were being threatened by an alliance between Syria and the Northern Tribes of Israel. God is calling the frightened Israelites to fear God not man, to make fearing God their refuge and sanctuary of protection. There are various things that come through for Peter's readers.

Firstly, we must appreciate how Peter swaps the LORD of hosts, YHWH, with Jesus indicating the deity of Christ. Just as the Israelites were to see YHWH as their refuge so we

see Christ as ours. The function of refuge and the honour of fearing are both related to deity.

Secondly, to honour Christ, to treat Him as Lord and to honour in heart as holy are all ways of worshipping Christ. The Lord's prayer says, 'hallowed be Thy name.' This is what Peter is asking these persecuted believers to do. To set Christ above all else in their hearts, even higher than their own safety.

This brings us to the important point for apologetics. To prepare yourself well to defend your faith you need to begin by fixing your heart in the right direction. Apologetics is not first and foremost a case of being the smartest, wisdom begins with the fear of God. The call here is to become a better worshipper, to work on our relationship with God, to make sure that our treasure is what it ought to be. We could say that the best road to good apologetics is theology because theology is the fuel for worship.

If God is your treasure, if you are enamoured with Him, if His glory is known to you as the greatest thing to live and die for. Then the fear of man will have its antidote, then the appeal of sin will have its better, then clever arguments will have a better kind of answer. It is easy to get excited about apologetics. If you like facebook fencing, and many young people love the conflict. If you are hungry for knowledge. If you get a kick out of good analysis and robust logic. If you have a desire to defend the faith or present a compelling case for Christ, then apologetics is going to be an exciting venture. However, when we engage in apologetics we are coming face to face with arguments that have deceived other sinners, you will be coming against people smarter than yourself, you will encounter all sorts of psychological pressure as they become belligerent or they misrepresent you. You are going into warfare where the devil who loves lies will seek to rattle your faith. If you do not have God as your God at the centre of your heart, things could go very badly. Peter begins with remembering who your God is on purpose. Being persecuted and possibly having to die for your faith will test you to the limits, unless you know your God and are deeply rooted and satisfied in Him, you are fair game to be derailed.

Our knowledge of God is not like how we know other things. Because it is the Holy Spirit who reveals God to us, and because we are able to grieve the Spirit by our sin the foundation of our apologetics cannot be purely rational.

Answering for our hope

'Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.' The word defence here can have one of two meanings. To make a formal defence in a courtroom type setting, or an informal defence in casual conversation. It is the word 'apologian' from which we get our word apologetics. It is also used in places like Phil. 1:7, 'It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.' And Phil. 1:16, 'The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.' Peter calls upon us to always be prepared to give a defence. V15 plays a crucial role, if we are in a good place with God, when the logic of living for God's glory is gripping our hearts we can easily make a case for why loving and serving God is the best way.

With 2000 years of challenges to the Christian faith and people's ears being filled with many bad arguments to refute Christianity, it behoves us to take that word prepare and apply it to our own context. Many of us have done training for our various vocations either through an apprenticeship of getting some sort of technical knowledge about a certain field. Our faith is

the most important thing in our lives and very few Christians are prepared to give a defence for why it is the truth above other options in the world today. I would say that in our day and age we are without an excuse. We are flooded with information, there are many apologetic type ministries that exist to help Christians answer hard questions and give a defence. Let me encourage you to get a few good books on the topic. Here is a reading challenge for you. As a Christian you should read one book a year on theology, church history, apologetics, marriage, biography, the church, and many other areas. If you read 10-20 pages a day you will read about 20 average sized books a year. Here are a few names to remember when it comes to apologetics. Perhaps let me preface these recommendations with the proviso that there is no perfect apologist. You will find faults with each one. So when you read be discerning. Buy Ravi Zacharias, William Lane Craig, Timothy Keller, C. S. Lewis, John Blanchard, James White, Greg Koukl; Douglas Groothuis, K. Scott Oliphant, James K A Smith, Alvin Plantinga, John Frame, Cornelius Van Til, Gordon Clarke, Francis Schaeffer. These and many others will be useful to you.

But be careful, the best way to prepare yourself to defend your faith is by knowing your own faith well. Sadly many get caught up in the conflict of the debate that they end up knowing what their opponents believe better than their own faith. It is possible to answer every question just by knowing your own faith well. When questions like how can a God of love send people to hell, or not elect everyone, or allow suffering. It is your knowledge of God as simple being who has many attributes that will set you up for answering that. The knowledge you have of God's love and how that relates to His holiness and His freedom. The knowledge you have of God's justice and how it relates to mercy in election. How God is mysterious and cannot be fully known but has revealed enough that we can know He is good even when we don't have all the information. When it comes to questions about the trinity, the incarnation or miracles, knowing the nature of who God is and the Creator-creature distinction will equip you to handle these things.

Not only that get to know your bible. Many attacks on the faith come from people who don't know the bible very well. Questions about genocide in the OT, or the God of the OT being different from the God of the NT, these sorts of questions are answered by you simply knowing the bible well. Many challenges to Christianity take the bible out of context, many heresies and cults are based on bad bible reading. If you learn to handle the Scripture well, you will be able to answer most questions.

Let me encourage you by saying that to be prepared you don't have to have PhDs in every area to know things truly. If you know God, and your bible you will be able to handle most problems.

Please notice that Peter anticipates that your hope will be questioned. Why do you think he says this? Well remember that these people were suffering and he is calling them to endure suffering patiently, without retaliation, while continuing to do good. This is confounding behaviour to the world. We when are not believers our reasons and motivations are very different. Our sadness, our gladness depends on very different things. The believer has eternal life, is guaranteed heaven, nothing can separate us from God's love, all sufferings gets turned to good, it is a privilege to suffer for Christ. We live with these realities in mind and are able to be joyful in our suffering. Here is another key part of our apologetic. It is not a swanky website with the latest form of social media for instant communication and participation. Your joy when others are joyless, your endurance when others give up, your silence when others are complaining, your worship when others are cursing God, this is what will cause people to sit up and pay attention. The good news is that this is not an extra burden, this is simply a call to live out the truth of the gospel.

Let me also highlight that the text talks about answering with gentleness and respect, what does this look like? The golden rule is our guide in apologetics. How would you like others to talk about your God, or represent your case, or talk to you? This should be our rule of thumb. To be polite does not mean we are agreeing with them, this is common courtesy and will keep the conversation calm and civil. Unfortunately we have seen too much unaccountable communication on the internet. Anonymous debating has led to people who don't know how to have a face to face conversation trolling one another online. As Christians we are not to resort to the cheap bullying tactics that many others use online.

Living lives of holiness

'having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.' We are to have clean consciences. In other words, we must live good lives free from accusation. Christians are very often slandered, we must live that the critics will have to eat their words. William Barclay reminds us of a good definition of a Christian, "A saint is someone whose life makes it easier to believe in God." Are you making it easier for the unbeliever to believe, or are your sins obstacles in his path? Just as your joy and hope is something God uses to draw the unbeliever to Christ, in the same way your holiness is a testimony of His reality.

Slander is the lies that people spread about us. Let what people say about us only be slander and not the truth. We will talk more about Christians being hypocrites and how this hinders people from believing in a future message, but let it be asserted here that preparation for defending your faith is not getting a philosophy degree but being holy.

My goal in today's message was to make apologetics natural, to salvage it from the image of being for clever people who like to argue and show how every believer can be effective in defending their faith. So how do you prepare yourself to defend your faith? According to Peter by having a real and vibrant faith in God, by preparing yourself to answer questions, by digging deeper into your hope, by persevering through trials with patience, through gentle and winsome speech and through good works.