SILENCING OUR CRITICS

We are continuing our study of First Peter this morning and will be in Chapter 2. Whenever I study a particular book of the Bible, I always find it helpful to keep in mind what the human author’s original purpose was for writing the words that I’m reading. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the Apostle Peter writes to persecuted believers who have been scattered, displaced from their homes and are now living as temporary aliens in several provinces of Asia Minor. These believers are enduring hardships and feeling the pressure of a hostile society. So Peter writes to these dear saints to encourage them in their faith.

In Chapter 1 Peter begins by reminding these Christians of their inheritance in Christ, their salvation, a living hope, which nobody can take away from them. He tells them that what they are going thru has been permitted by God for a purpose (testing to prove their faith is genuine), but it is only temporary. Everything on this old earth will pass away, but God’s Word will remain forever. Beginning in Chapter 2 and running to the end of his letter Peter reminds his readers of God’s expectations of His people – how they, as Christians, are to live. He reminds them of who they are in Christ – they are “like living stones,” built up together into a spiritual house (a temple), whose cornerstone is Jesus Christ. God has saved them for a reason. They are God’s chosen people, called out of darkness into light that ultimately they may bring glory and honor to Him.

Now the fact is that Peter is writing to a specific group of believers in around 64 A.D. Does what he says to them back then apply also to those of us who are living in the United States in 2016? Yes, I believe that it does. You see, in God’s sovereignty He has preserved Peter’s words in the canon of scripture and they have been passed down thru the centuries, translated into our own language numerous times for a reason. God wants us to hear Peter’s message and then apply it to our lives.

In our passage today Peter mentions 3 specific areas where we as Christians can be a positive influence for Jesus Christ in our world. Then at the end of the chapter he gives us the perfect example of Jesus. The key to understanding why Peter says what he says is found in verse 15: “For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.” That’s why I have entitled today’s lesson “Silencing Our Critics.”

READ 1 Peter 2:11-12

“Beloved” is a term of endearment. It is used frequently in the N.T. letters for believers in Jesus Christ. Peter uses it twice in 1 Peter and 6 times in 2 Peter. Of course John uses it a lot in his epistles as does Paul, James, Jude and the writer of Hebrews. It means “dearly loved.” It’s the way God the Father described His Son – “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17). The people that Peter is writing to, many he probably knew personally, are near and dear to his heart. He loves them and he has something important to tell them.

The first area of influence we Christians have in our world is as “sojourners and exiles” (v 11). The KJV says, “strangers and pilgrims.” The NASB says, “aliens and strangers.” The NIV and the NET Bible say, “foreigners and exiles.” And certainly these dispersed Christians WERE aliens, exiles in a foreign land quite literally. They were outsiders. But in a broader sense all of us Christians (even those of us living in America today) are aliens, foreigners, outsiders. Why is that? Because we are citizens of heaven. That’s what Paul said in Philippians 3:20: “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ…” As that old song said, “This world is not my home, I’m just passin’ thru.” Jesus put it this way when He was talking to His disciples: “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” (John 15:19). And Jesus’ words really hits at the heart of the issue. We are NOT of this world. We live among people who ARE from here – they have other beliefs, other values, other morals – different from ours. We are IN the world, but we are not OF the world. In a spiritual sense, then, we are sojourners.

So there is this animosity that exists between us and the world, those who are not believers. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to live holy lives, set apart and different from the world. And if we live out our Christianity the way God’s word instructs us to do, then we’re going to rub people the wrong way. They aren’t going to like us very well. They’re going to think that we think we are better than they are. And in Peter’s day those 1st C believers were being falsely accused of all sorts of evils. They were accused of atheism because they wouldn’t worship the Roman gods. They were accused of cannibalism, of eating human flesh. They even said they were eating their own children at their feasts. They were accused of incest, of disrupting the social order, of being haters of men, of insurrection, and on it on it goes. Of course none of that was true.

Well it’s one thing to be slandered and falsely accused by unbelievers. We don’t need to be adding any fuel to the fire. But in recent years we’ve been embarrassed by the scandalous behavior of those who say they are Christians: priests sexually molesting children, preachers having affairs, people who openly express their faith in Christ caught cheating, lying, breaking the law, publicly embracing the gay agenda for political expediency, etc. The people in the world, unbelievers, those hostile toward Christianity are going to scrutinize us and they will pick up on the inconsistencies in our lives. They’re just looking for any little thing to accuse us with. You’ll hear them say things like, “See, you church people are just a bunch of hypocrites!” Maybe you have people in your own families who won’t go to church because of what Christians in their past have either said of done to them which turned them off. It’s a real issue.

And so Peter knowing all of this, knowing the scrutiny that believers are under in a society that is hostile toward them makes an urgent plea to “abstain from the passions of the flesh” and to “keep your conduct among the Gentiles [in this context, unbelievers] honorable.” John MacArthur says this: “The most effective tool of evangelism we possess is the power of a righteous life.” And so Peter calls on us to be faithful witnesses for Christ. We are to live the kind of life that makes our testimony, our words believable. When people see that we are doing what is good and right it will lend validity to our witness. The unsaved people among we live are watching us. We can influence them either positively or negatively for Jesus Christ by our actions.

Jesus said, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:16).

It’s a given. Unbelievers are going to speak evil of Christians. But if we live like Christ wants us to live, then perhaps we can even unknowingly influence people to become believers. I think that’s what Peter is referring to at the end of verse 12 when he says that “they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” In the Bible any time it mentions God visiting man it is either for judgment or for blessing. Here I believe Peter is referring to a visit by God for redemption, for salvation. In other words the idea is this: when a person gets saved, maybe years from now, they will be able to point back at the testimony of certain faithful Christians that were in their lives.

Does our behavior matter? Yes it does!

READ 1 Peter 2:13-17

The second area of influence we have is as citizens of the place in which we live. In our case we are citizens of the United States, of Texas and of Rockwall County (or Hunt County). While it is true that we are citizens of heaven in a spiritual sense, for now physically we are citizens of the land where God has placed us temporarily. So we have a responsibility as citizens. We’re not free to just live and act any old way we want to just because we are citizens of heaven. We are still expected by God to respect the laws of the land, to pay our taxes, to drive the speed limit, to not take the law into our own hands. If we violate any of these we can expect to pay a penalty.

“For the Lord’s sake” (v 13) means that we subject ourselves because of the Lord, because our testimony for Christ is more important than exercising our own rights. Being good citizens will offer a positive testimony for Christ.

The Bible makes it clear that human institutions, governments are established by God – the good ones, the bad ones and all the ones in between. No government is perfect not even the government of the greatest nation on earth, the United States. Why not? Because people are imperfect. Man is by his nature sinful, depraved. So why did God establish human government? To control man in his society and to form social relationships. To keep order. God is sovereign. He raises up governments and world leaders and He removes them. God will judge the bad leaders and in His time He will replace them. Our responsibility as citizens is to be subject to them, to the leaders that God has placed over us. In Romans 13 Paul offers a good parallel passage on being subject to the government.

So, what about civil disobedience? Is it OK for Christians to protest or speak out against social injustices. Should we fight to change what we feel are corrupt laws or practices? Bear in mind that whatever you do as a Christian directly reflects on Jesus Christ. I think we do have a responsibility as Christians to make our voices heard but we need to do so in a way that brings honor and glory to our Lord.

Verse 17 is citizenship theology. “Honor everyone.” As Christians we are to treat all people with dignity, honor and respect, yes, even our enemies. All people were created by God and made in His image. “Love the brotherhood.” Love your fellow believers in Christ. “Fear God. Honor the emperor.” We would say, “Honor the President.” No matter who gets elected! I’m going to go out on a limb and say that no matter who it is that we elect in November they will not be worse than the Emperor Nero. That’s who the Roman leader was in Peter’s day! And yet he said to honor the emperor. So it doesn’t matter who the leader is, our responsibility as Christian citizens of the United States is to honor our President and our elected officials. Proverbs offers us this admonition: “My son, fear the LORD and the king, and do not join with those who do otherwise, for disaster will arise suddenly from them, and who knows the ruin that will come from them both?” (Prov 24:21-22)

Pray for your leaders and let God deal with them as He sees fit.

READ 1 Peter 2:18-20

The third area of influence we have is as servants. In Peter’s day many of his readers were slaves. They were owned. They didn’t have rights. They couldn’t just quit their jobs if they didn’t like it. There were no labor laws to protect them from unfair masters. In our day, thankfully, slavery is no longer practiced, so the application of this passage for us today would be that of employee – employer. We should show respect for our bosses whether they are good and kind or they are harsh and unfair. Again, this is what God wants us to do. One commentary I read said, “We don’t have a secular job, but a spiritual calling.” I believe that’s the spirit of what Peter is saying here.

Be the best employee you can be and, remember, you work for the Lord first and foremost. I firmly believe that we Christians should be the best workers and, thus, earn the respect of many of our coworkers and bosses who may not be Christians. Again this will offer a positive testimony for Christ which is what our lives should be all about.

Well, Peter concludes Chapter 2 by lifting Christ up as our pattern. All the things that Peter has urged us to do as aliens, citizens or servants Jesus showed us how that is to be lived out. He demonstrated the attitude that we should have.

READ 1 Peter 1:21-25

Jesus suffering and death on the cross was not only the redemptive work of God for us, but it also provided us an example of how we are to conduct ourselves whenever we are treated unfairly. Jesus fully understood that what was happening to Him was being allowed by the Father for a divine purpose and He submitted to that. Jesus didn’t lash out against His accusers or fight back. Instead He willingly subjected Himself to their authority and He bore the shame and endured the abuse for us, because He loved us, so that we might be saved. Paul tells us in Philippians that Jesus “humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him…” (Phil 2:8-9)

And the result was that we returned to the Great Shepherd, we turned to Christ, we repented, we got saved. The NASB translates “Overseer” (v 25) as “Guardian.” Jesus is not only the One who saved us, but He is the One who keeps us saved. I close with the words of Jesus from John Chapter 10: “I give eternal life to them (My sheep) and they shall never perish; and no one - NO ONE – shall snatch them out of My hand.”

These were indeed comforting words for those persecuted saints in Peter’s day and they are most certainly comforting words even for us today. Praise God!