

Finding Hope by Becoming Contagious Christians

Rich Nathan
The Reason for our Hope
1 Peter 3:13-18
May 16 & 17, 2020

I want to begin today with a true story about two Mennonite neighbors who had a dispute concerning their property line. They argued about the matter and tried in every way to come to an agreement, but they just couldn't work it out on their own. So rather than allow a permanent breach in their relationship, they decided to go to a court and let a judge decide between them. They both agreed to abide by the judge's decision and not to file an appeal.

The day for the trial arrived and one of the farmers, named David, came by where he found the other farmer, John, working in his field of potatoes. "Come, John," said David, "Let us go to the courts together!"

John answered, "David, these potatoes will suffer if they are not hilled today. You go to court and tell the story. You know about all of our differences and you can tell them as well as me. First put your side before the court and then mine. Stop by on your way home and tell me the verdict."

So David went on alone to the city where the court was. That evening, David came walking back up the mountain. "Well, brother," David said as John came to meet him halfway, "I went to court and put both sides before them and the judge decided in your favor." Then David continued on his way whistling a little tune.

Imagine if Christians were known to be so full of integrity, so honest that you could trust that if you got into a dispute with a Christian and it went before a judge or a Christian mediator, you wouldn't have to even show up to present your side of the case. That the Christian would present your side so fully and fairly and would not exaggerate the positives of their side or maximize the negatives of your side. What do you think the impact on the world would be if Christians were the kind of people that you could absolutely trust? When they shake your hand, or in the age of coronavirus, when they wave their elbow at you, you can take it to the bank.

We're continuing a series from 1 Peter called "The Reason for our Hope". We're actually going to find "The Reason for our Hope" where we got our series title from in today's passage.

When this pandemic began and we all went into lockdown, one of the questions that I challenged you with was this: how can we as individuals and our church collectively emerge from the pandemic better than we went in? Is it possible, friend, that Christians can still change the world for the better? All of us have our own list of negative features of our own culture – the materialism, the lack of relational connection, the prioritizing of money over people's lives or character, the lack of concern for those most in need, the growing in inequality between the rich and the poor. Is there a way, post-pandemic, for genuine Christian faith to spread?

All of us have been concerned about the spread of the virus, but as I was preparing this message, I remembered the title of an old book that I read years ago called *Becoming a Contagious Christian*. What we Jesus followers want to spread is not COVID but Christian faith.

The author wrote this:

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Before we become highly contagious Christians, we must first live in a way that convinces people around us that we actually have the disease ourselves. To quote an old proverb: your spouse probably doesn't need a definition of Christianity as much as he or she needs a demonstration of Christianity.

I titled today's talk "Finding Hope by Becoming Contagious Christians". Let's pray.

Slide 1 Peter 3:13-18

¹³ Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." ¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. ¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.

This passage turns on imitating the example of Christ.

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Becoming a contagious Christian by imitating the pattern of Christ

We see that in verse 18:

Slide 1 Peter 3:18

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.

This verse is saying that the reason why suffering for doing good is better than suffering for doing evil is because of Christ who himself suffered for doing good.

Remember, Peter was one of the original disciples – one of the original followers – of Jesus.

And whenever Peter wanted to think about the way a Christian ought to live, his touchstone, his model, the pattern for life was Jesus himself. He always went back to here's what Jesus used to do, here's what Jesus used to say to us. The imitation of Christ is a theme that comes through all of 1 Peter.

I could cite multiple other examples from 1 Peter in which he urges on the early Christians and us the pattern of Christ. We need to remember the pattern of Christ's life whenever we try to bear witness to Christ. For example, some of us tend to be talkers and others of us tend to be doers. Some people emphasize the proclamation of the gospel through words and others emphasize the demonstration of the gospel through good deeds. You don't just see this with individuals, you see it in churches. Some churches are really good about preaching the gospel and others are really good about showing the gospel through acts of charity and social justice. We have preaching churches. We have serving churches. What's more important?

If we think about the pattern of Jesus, the example of Jesus, we would say the question of whether you should preach or do is nonsensical because Jesus did both. He was the Word become flesh. He combined a life and a message. In the Bible, it's never one or the other. You just need to show a life and then people will be pointed to Jesus. No, they won't. Your life is not self-interpreting. Secular people who meet nice Christians won't immediately think to themselves, "Oh, the reason why this person is so nice, the reason why they are giving me a bag of groceries, the reason why they are so helpful at work is because Jesus is in their life."

That's not what a secular person thinks. A secular person says to themselves that the reason why a person is nice to them is because they are a nice person. That's absolutely the way that I thought before I came to know Jesus. When I met Marlene, she was an incredibly nice person. She was truthful, she was forgiving, she was absolutely authentic, she was real. She didn't care about who was popular and who was not. My thought about Marlene was, "Here's a really nice

person. Boy, this is a good human being.” I didn’t associate her goodness with Jesus. It wouldn’t have occurred to me to think that way. Had she not also verbally communicated to me a message about Jesus, I never would have found him.

We assume that people will connect the dots between you being a good person and who Jesus is in your life. They won’t! Jesus Christ himself is the pattern for our witness. With Jesus, it’s always both-and. He didn’t just give us words without a life. If he came to just give us words, then he would have gotten a bunch of scribes together and dictated a manifesto. But he gave us a life. A life of love. A life of charity. A life of forgiveness. A life of signs and wonders. A life of self-sacrifice and suffering. But Jesus didn’t just give us a life. He went out preaching everywhere that the kingdom of God had come. Without a faithful interpretation of what he did through a message. Here’s the meaning of the cross. Here’s the meaning of the resurrection – without the message, the life and resurrection would have been misunderstood.

In the Bible, God always interprets what he does. He doesn’t leave us guessing what the meaning of the splitting of the Red Sea is or what the meaning of the miraculous is or the meaning of the cross. And we can’t leave people guessing either. Contagious Christians think about their witness as following the example of Christ. Let’s start where Peter does, with the deeds of Christ.

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Becoming a contagious Christian by doing the deeds of Christ

Notice how many times in this text Peter talks about doing good, living a good life.

Slide 1 Peter 3:13

¹³ Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?

Slide 1 Peter 3:14

¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.”

Slide 1 Peter 3:16

¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Slide 1 Peter 3:17

¹⁷ For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

What does the witness of doing good look like in our lives? How do we bear witness to Jesus through deeds, through actions? What Peter points to first of all is living a life of peace.

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A life of peace

Slide 1 Peter 3:14

¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.”

Peter says that even if it turns out badly for you, do not fear what they fear. How do we bear witness to Jesus? How do we follow his example? Peter says we should live a life of peace. You do not have to fear what everyone else fears. What does everyone else fear? During a pandemic, everyone else fears getting sick. Everyone else fears the loss of their income. Everyone else fears that their retirement account is shrinking. Everyone else fears the future. We fear each other. But followers of Jesus bear witness to a different power, a higher power, a greater Lord. We do not have to be caught up in the fears of the world. Contagious Christians say, “If I lost everything, I wouldn’t be alone. I will still have Jesus. If I lose my job, Jesus promises to provide for me tomorrow. He has provided for me today. If I die, I wouldn’t cease to exist. I will live forever because Jesus Christ rose from the dead and I’m attached to him.”

Friend, do you really believe in the resurrection of Jesus – that nothing, not even death can ultimately threaten you or those you love. Followers of Jesus, you will one day see Jesus face to face! You will experience the life of the kingdom! You have nothing to fear! Talk about a contagious witness, during a time of pandemic – live a life of peace!

There’s a second way to imitate Jesus and bear witness through our actions. That’s by living:

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A life of integrity

Peter talks about the witness of a consistent life.

Slide 1 Peter 3:16-17

¹⁶keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

I talked about this in my introduction. What if when you hired a Christian car mechanic you knew that they would diagnose your problem accurately, that they would charge you a fair price, that they would only charge you for the work and material that they actually used, that they were thorough. Do you think great, reliable service by a Christian would make an impression on secular customers? Of course it would! What if you knew that your boss was a Christian and she listened attentively to employee concerns and suggestions and treated her staff with respect? What if she was super clear with her expectations for performance and helped her team achieve excellence? What if she spoke to you with wisdom and thoughtfulness? What if she had a great, respectful healthy marriage? You better believe someone like that would spread her Christian faith.

I want to point to one more thing about being a contagious witness – through deeds and that is by living a life of kindness and generosity.

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A life of kindness and generosity

It was followers of Jesus who started the first hospitals the world ever knew. It was followers of Jesus who started the first orphanages. It was followers of Jesus who labored to end the slave trade. It was followers of Jesus who today run most of our nation's food pantries and soup kitchens and mobile feeding programs, especially for children. I don't know how you picture Jesus in your mind's eye when you think about him, when you pray to him? What I think of is the kindest person I have ever met. He often has a smile on his face. He is incredibly generous.

What if Christians were known as the kindest, most open-handed, most generous people in the world? If you need help, find a Christian! If you need help, go to a church! If you need food or help with an unintended pregnancy or help getting free from an addiction or medical care or just hope for the future – check out the church! That kind of faith would be contagious. Do you think it would spread? I do.

We can be contagious Christians by doing the deeds of Christ. But remember that Jesus didn't live a life without a message. We also imitate Christ by speaking the words of Christ.

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Become a contagious Christian by speaking the words of Christ

Let's look at verse 15:

Slide 1 Peter 3:15

¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,

What would it mean in your verbal witness to revere Christ as Lord? Certainly, one thing that it would mean is to follow the example of Jesus by making Jesus the issue. Jesus always made himself the issue. Who do you say that I am? The best verbal witnessing strategy that any Christian could ever employ is to ask the question am I making Jesus the issue? Often, Christians collide with other people, but it really has nothing to do with Jesus or even with God's Word. Rarely is it "I'm sorry, I know we have tension in our relationship, but it's because you want me to lie to a customer and I can't lie because I'm a Christian." "I know we have tension, but it's because you want me to sign this tax return and I can't sign a return that I know is false." "I can't get drunk with you. I can't party the way we used to." "I won't have sex before marriage, I'm a Christian!"

Christians collide with other people, but it's not about Christ's commands or about who Jesus is. It's about everything in the world other than Jesus. We argue with people about politics. We disagree about personal preferences and personality differences, child raising preferences, preferences about weddings, birthdays and family gatherings. We argue about abortion or sexuality or morality. What if followers of Jesus gave up being the world's moral policemen and regularly pointed to Jesus for the reason we do what we do?

Here's what Peter says,

Slide 1 Peter 3:15

¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,

Literally, Peter says "make a defense". Peter is using a term that in ancient Greek came from the setting of a court room and had to do with providing a legal defense to charges that were leveled against a person. The Greek word is

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apologian = defense

This is where we get the term apologetics. The defense of the gospel. How do we offer a verbal defense for the gospel? I tell you one thing – make Jesus the issue. Focus on Jesus, not everything else.

Second, we need to talk about our own personal experience of Jesus. And if we find we don't have much to talk about from our own personal experience of Jesus, that's something we ought to examine, don't you think? But in the New Testament, virtually every time we see somebody making a defense for the gospel, they share their own personal experience of Jesus. Here's where I was before I met Jesus.

The Apostle Paul defends the Christian faith by talking about how hard he previously worked to please God. But he always fell short! His activity was never enough. But then he met Jesus! And Jesus changed his life and set him free from a life of religious striving. Paul discovered the grace of God and the hope of God's acceptance through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

One of the most powerful ways to witness to Jesus through words is by saying "Here's what Jesus has done for me." It's like the old line in "Amazing Grace", "I once was lost, but now I'm found. I once was blind, but now I see."

You don't have to be a philosopher. You don't have to be an intellectual. You don't have to have a post-graduate degree to talk about your own personal experience of God. The invitation

then is very simple. Why don't you try Jesus out for yourself and see if your life doesn't change for the better?

As a result of finding Jesus I have way more joy in my life than I used to have. I have more freedom. I'm not as anxious or angry as I used to be. I'm a better dad, a better husband, a better friend. I tell the truth way more. I know that I'm loved. I'm not afraid of the future. I'm no longer addicted. The psalmist says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Why don't you try Jesus? He worked for me. He will work for you!

What's the appeal that we're making to others by sharing our personal experience? We can talk about a wonderful meal all day long, but ultimately what we're saying to people is "You need to taste and see that the Lord is good for yourself. He will change your life for the better! You will never lose with Jesus ever. You're always going to be trading up never down. Whatever you have to give up or cease or get rid of, when you find Jesus and follow him, you're always trading up."

We've talked about the pattern of Christ that when we're bearing witness we're imitating the deeds of Christ, we're imitating the words of Christ and, finally, Peter says we're imitating

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Becoming a contagious Christian by imitating the humility of Jesus

Look at 1 Peter 3:15 again.

Slide 1 Peter 3:15

¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,

There's a certain modesty to a good witness to Jesus, a certain humility where we don't pretend to know more than we do. One of the most helpful things in bearing witness to Jesus is simply the acknowledgement that I don't know the answer to your questions. Maybe someone else does and I can look into it for you, but I do know Jesus and I know the changes Jesus made in my life.

One of the most powerful things that any of us can do in bearing witness to Jesus is to display modesty and humility. We let people know, "Not everything in my life is going well. You know the reality of my family or this or that relationship or what I've struggled with over the years. But I tell you, it's so much better than it otherwise would have been because Jesus is in my life." When I think about the manner of Jesus, I think about his incredible humility and his willingness to display weakness. The truth is that we don't know everything. Nowhere is this more true than when we are confronted with suffering – the suffering experienced by so many during this pandemic and the suffering experienced throughout history.

I remember a few years ago, Marlene and I visited the Auschwitz extermination camp in Poland. It was there in Auschwitz that more than a million Jews were systematically murdered with factory-like efficiency. All of the Jewish residents of my grandmother's hometown in Poland were killed there. Every last one was wiped off the face of the earth. And I remember standing alone in the dark in one of those gas chambers and I thought to myself, "This would have been me had my grandmother's family not come over. I would have been in one of these gas chambers." And then in the darkness, I thought, "God, where were you? Where were you when all this was happening?"

The truth is that I have no answers for terrible evil that we do to each other. The hurts, the trauma, the abuse that we visit on one another. I have no ultimate answers for the various losses we are experiencing during this pandemic. But I do know Jesus. I know that in Jesus, God suffered along with his creation. I know that God understands how we feel because he personally lived our existence. And I know that in the future God will deal with all the injustice in the world. That's my hope. And it's this firm hope in God – that he will one day fix everything – that makes our faith contagious! Let's pray.

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The Reason for our Hope
1 Peter 3:13-18
May 16 & 17, 2020

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