

Evangelism Sunday
January 30, 2005
1 Peter 3:15-16

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Always Prepared to Evangelize

1. A prepared heart
2. A prepared life
3. A prepared mouth

^{NIV} 1 Peter 3:15 But in your hearts set apart 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.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Are you familiar with the Latin phrase *Semper paratus*? It means “always ready” or “always prepared” and it’s the motto of the United States Coast Guard. In fact, the phrase *semper paratus* is included in the chorus of the Coast Guard anthem. *“We’re always read for the call, We place our trust in Thee. Through howling gale and shot and shell, To win our victory. ‘Semper paratus’ is our guide, Our pledge, our motto, too. We’re ‘Always Ready,’ do or die! Aye! Coast Guard, we fight for you.”*

As we hear these verses from 1 Peter 3 on this Evangelism Sunday, it occurs to me that Christians might also adopt the motto “Always Prepared.” What we are to be always ready to do is not to rescue the passengers of a sinking boat or the crewmen of a vessel that’s gone aground. God wants us to stand in readiness to rescue those who are drowning in unbelief, those who are in peril because they don’t know Jesus and don’t confess him as their Lord. To help us toward that constant readiness to evangelize, the apostle Peter describes for us what it means to have a heart that’s prepared to evangelize, as well as a life and a mouth that are *semper paratus*.

1. A prepared heart

The preparation to evangelize the lost—that is, to share with them the good news of Jesus Christ—begins in the heart of the believer. Peter writes, *“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.”* To call Christ is my Lord is to confess my allegiance to him. This confession flows from a heart that understands and appreciates what Jesus has done for me. We were, in the words of one of our

hymns, “heedlessly falling.” (CW, 234, stz 3) It’s like a skydiver who discovers to his terror that neither his main nor his reserve parachute will open. He knows the fate toward which he’s falling. There was nothing we could do to avoid death, either. We had no way of putting on the brakes in our heedless, headlong fall toward hell. We were hurtling toward eternal destruction. But I’ve heard of incidents where another skydiver sees what’s happening and alters the course of his dive to be able to catch up to and take hold of the person who is speeding toward impact with the ground. Then both divers use the one chute to land safely. That’s essentially what Jesus did for us when he **“bore our sins in his body on the tree.”** He grabbed hold of us and saved us. By his wounds we have been healed. Peter puts it another way later in this letter. He writes, **“Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”** (1 Pet. 2:24, 3:18)

Rescued from hell and healed from sin, Christ is Lord in our hearts. What he’s done for us gives us what Peter calls “hope.” It’s the confidence that through Jesus’ resurrection we have been given **“an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade—kept in heaven for (us) who through faith are shielded by God’s power.”** (1 Peter 1:4-5) We know what the future holds. The one who holds the future has promised it to us for Jesus’ sake. That’s hope.

You may be wondering, though, whether this really needs saying. Would someone who *hasn’t* enthroned Christ as Lord in his heart be interested in telling the lost the good news about Jesus? Probably not. But these words are a caution that if we are trying to juggle multiple allegiances, if Christ isn’t reigning supreme and alone as Lord in our hearts, that may explain why we aren’t looking for opportunities to give the reason for our hope.

For the early Christians who first read this letter, the competing allegiance was to their own physical welfare. Just by identifying themselves as Christians they coming in for all kinds of verbal abuse. The physical intimidation wasn’t far behind the insults. The result, quite easily, could be fear, fear that silenced their confession of Christ as Lord, fear that resulted in a kind of paralysis as far as evangelism was concerned. Fear hampers us, too. It’s not so much the fear of physical violence, or even of the verbal taunts these people were receiving. It’s more a concern with how we’ll be received and perceived if we open up about our Christianity. That’s why, in the words just before this section, Peter writes a series of encouragements. He says, **“Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.”** (1 Pet. 3:13-14) There’s no doubt that telling unbelievers the good news about Jesus requires courageous hearts. With God’s help we can conquer our fears as we love the lost and remember the importance of the message we have to share.

So, now, I've got a heart that's prepared for witnessing because Jesus reigns in my heart and he supplies the courage for evangelizing. That's important. But there's another kind of preparation for sharing our hope that Peter doesn't want us to overlook. Our lives also have to be prepared for evangelizing. Let's see what he means by that.

2. A prepared life

These two verses about evangelizing here in 1 Peter 3 occur in a context in which the subject has been suffering for doing good. That's what leads Peter to mention the people *"who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ."* You may not have thought of it in these terms, but I'm sure you've thought about it: good behavior in Christ is a kind of pre-evangelism. God can use the way we live our Christian lives to open the door for witnessing. That's why Peter says earlier, **"Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."** (3:8-9) This subject of our lives as Christians opening doors for the sharing of the gospel is much on Peter's mind. In another place in this same letter he urged, **"Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."** (2:12)

I think we can understand that if our lives as people whose hope is in Christ are not discernibly different from the lives of the unbelievers around us, there won't be many doors opening for sharing our hope. But, on the other hand, when our hope does manifest itself in our lives, it can lead those who are observing us to be curious about what motivates us. They may ask questions about our faith. And that's when we want to be ready to give a reason for the hope that we have. That's when we want to have mouths that are prepared.

3. A prepared mouth

The book of Acts contains one example after another of believers who—even in the face of intense hostility—give eloquent witness to the hope that was in them. I think of this same apostle Peter and his fellow apostle, John, being ordered by the Sanhedrin not to speak any more of Jesus and his resurrection. And even though Peter and John were standing before the same body that had only months before sentenced Jesus to death, they replied, **"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."** Threatened yet again, they said, **"We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."** Later in Acts, it's Stephen's turn to be brought before the Sanhedrin. With his face like the face of an angel, he reviewed the history of God's plan of salvation and spoke of the coming of the Righteous One, Jesus Christ. And, of course, there's Paul's

testimony in Athens before the Areopagus and in Caesarea before King Herod Agrippa. We also have contemporary defenders of Christianity, people like Norman Geisler, Hank Hanegraaff, Gleason Archer and others, people who have a near encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible and Christian doctrine, people whose mouths are well-prepared to speak passionately on behalf of the cause of Christ.

And, ironically, that may be what discourages the rest of us. Like Moses, we don't think we speak very well. Or we say we don't know our Bibles well enough to speak to others about Jesus. But we should remember this: making an effort to tell someone about Jesus doesn't mean that we're obligated to answer every possible objection to the Christian faith that could be raised. We're not. The little Jewish girl who told Naaman about her God was not a Bible scholar or noted apologist for her faith. She just shared her hope in simple words. In today's Gospel lesson, we saw Andrew telling his brother, Simon Peter about Jesus. Andrew probably didn't have it all completely sorted out in his mind either, but he shared what he was certain about with Peter. He said, "**We have found the Messiah.**" (John 1:41)

It's not just *what* we say about Christ that's important; *how* we say it is almost as important. If our witness to Christ is tinged with arrogance or anger, it's unlikely that the person receiving it will be able to see the love of Christ in us. That's why Peter says we are to be always prepared to give the reason for the hope that is in us, "**but do this with gentleness and respect.**" The subject of Jesus and the eternal life we have through faith in him is of such solemn importance, that we don't want pride or flippancy to get in the way of the Holy Spirit's work. That's why a silent prayer that Jesus would give us the words to use and that he'd give us his love for the lost can be a great help.

I believe that this entire subject of evangelism induces a lot of guilt in Christians. We preachers have probably been responsible for much of that guilt. As I was thinking about how to present today's message, I came across a sermon in which a pastor was encouraging Christians to wash their blood-stained hands, that is, to repent of complicity in the eternal destruction of the people with whom they did *not* share Jesus. I wonder about that approach. I think the Bible makes it clear that God is going to get his chosen ones to heaven, with or without our help. What God *does* do is give each of us opportunities to be a part of this blessed work. Viewed that way, sharing Jesus with the lost is a wonderful privilege, not an obligation that we're guilt-driven to carry out. It's for the privilege of sharing our hope with those who don't know their Savior that we want hearts and lives and mouths that are *semper paratus*. Amen.