

Explore the Bible Series for April 15: Acting like Jesus in the face of suffering

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Acting like Jesus in the face of suffering

- 1 Peter 3:13-4:6

By Kathryn Aragon

First Baptist Church, Duncanville

I wonder if we confessed to people when we witness that Christianity is a life of suffering if there would be as many Christians. There certainly would be fewer shallow Christians.

C.S. Lewis is quoted as saying: "We were promised sufferings. They were part of the program. We were even told, 'Blessed are they that mourn.'"

That's not one of the promises that first attracts us to Christianity. And once we settle into our faith and learn that Christianity is supposed to be difficult, we still resist the idea.



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Our reading this week begins with words that echo our feelings about how things ought to be. “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?” (3:13). It’s a thought we like to hold on to. Christianity is supposed to solve our problems, not create new ones.

Unfortunately, though, for many Christians doing good really does bring harm. In our callous, atheistic world, it’s easy to understand. God tells us his wisdom is foolishness to man (1 Corinthians 2:14). Therefore, when non-Christians see God’s precepts lived out, they find them ridiculous, and the people who dare to be so different are rejected. This form of suffering we can understand, even if we don’t like it.

Sadly, though, this isn’t the only persecution Christians incur when they try to obey God. Some of our greatest suffering will come at the hands of other Christians who either judge us because our behavior makes them look bad or reject us because it convicts them.

Regardless of its source, however, we must accept the truth of suffering. Paul tells us, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). Jesus tells us we are blessed when we are hated, excluded, insulted and rejected because of him. But he takes this teaching one step further when he says, “Woe to you when all men speak well of you” (Luke 6:26). Not only are we to expect suffering. We must worry if it doesn’t happen.

So where do we turn? How do we reconcile our desire to obey God with the

consequences of obedience? It's time we Christians lay down our rose-colored glasses and accept the truth. We like to talk about being like Jesus, yet we refuse to agree with his thinking. The truth of the matter is we never will successfully act like Jesus until we begin to think like him. We must accept suffering as a natural part of our faith, and we need to learn to respond to it properly.

There's only one problem. Even if we fully accept the idea of suffering, most of us don't really know how to respond to it. We'd like to be more Christ-like, but we don't know how. Four suggestions follow.

Measure actions against God, not men

First of all, we have a tendency to be people-pleasers. Somehow ideas have developed that Christians can't stand up for themselves or disagree with others. Sometimes we can't even speak the truth because the truth just sounds un-Christian. So when we are confronted for being different, we find ourselves in conflict. We must choose between disobeying God and displeasing people.

What do we do? The Bible reminds us we should not fear the reactions of people. "Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Although this isn't a side of God we like to dwell on, it's the truth. We need to concentrate on being God-pleasers rather than people-pleasers.

Furthermore, when troubles come our way, we tend to look to other people to know how to act. If we are called down, we can always compare ourselves to others. "I'm only doing what everyone else does." Or, "So-and-so did worse than I did." This tendency to compare is wrong.

God is the only standard we should measure ourselves against. The Apostle

Paul says: “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise” (2 Corinthians 10:12-18). The wise man only measures his actions against the plumb line of Jesus and his word. Any other measure is faulty.

Respond, don't react

The dictionary defines “react” as acting in response to a stimulus. To respond, on the other hand, is to act in return. Although the difference is subtle, it is clear. Pavlov taught dogs to react to the ringing of a bell. So when he rang the bell, the dogs were no longer in control. Instead, they merely reacted in the way they were programmed to behave. Reacting is not a voluntary action. The stimulus is the controlling factor.

Conversely, responding retains control. A response is a plan of action put into motion. It isn't programmed behavior but a choice. When we react, we give up control to the thing that causes us to react. What's worse, when we give up control in this way, we also give away God's ability to control us.

Most of us tend to react to people and life's circumstances. Rarely do we really sit down to evaluate the right and wrong of how we act. Instead, we react to life in keeping with the emotions aroused by circumstances, emotions that rarely line up with God's expectations.

The answer to this problem is to make a plan. We must know what God expects and what we believe, and then decide how we will respond when different problems arise.

Paul said, “When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly” (1 Corinthians 4:12-13). This is no accident. Paul didn't respond this way because he's

naturally nicer than the rest of us. No, he made a decision. And unless we make a similar decision, we will continue to react to life. Christian behavior doesn't just happen. It's a hard decision made over and over again.

Keep your focus on God

Like Peter walking on water, if we take our eyes off Jesus, we won't be able to maintain the miracle of Christlike behavior. Responding rather than reacting to life requires our constant focus on God. It demands we remember our ultimate goal. All too often, we forget this life isn't the end. One day, we will stand before God for judgment and on that day we want to have a "clear conscience" (4:6). By basing our behavior on God's expectations rather than the world's, we will be able to do just that.

Paul puts it this way: "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:17-18). It's easy to fix our eyes on our problems and conflicts. But when we refocus and put our eyes back on Jesus, those problems become less of an issue. Sure, returning kindness for cruelty is difficult, but it makes more sense when we're looking at Jesus.

Know God's word

If we don't know God's desires for us, we'll never measure up to his standards. One of our greatest failings as Christians is taking other people's word for what God says rather than discovering for ourselves what God wants. Knowing life would be difficult, God wrote the manual.

He gave us the Bible to teach us how to respond to life properly. If we want

to please God, we need to understand that he is our best source for finding the answers to life's difficulties. If our exact problem isn't in the Bible, the concept is. We need to talk to him, read his word, and know him personally. Then our choices will be based on truth and we'll begin responding to life rather than reacting to it. We'll regain control over our behavior, which means we have a better chance of achieving Christlikeness.

The epitome of Christlikeness

As anyone who's ever tried it knows, pure obedience to God's commands makes us different. For better or for worse, it also tends to attract attention. People don't understand Christlike behavior. They don't understand why we would choose to obey Jesus even when it causes suffering.

If we've followed the four steps outlined above, however, we'll be ready with an answer: "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, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (3:15-16).

Furthermore, the way we respond to suffering is evidence of our faith. We can all agree suffering is stressful, and the behavior we exhibit while under stress tends to reveal the true condition of our hearts. If we have really allowed God to change our hearts, we'll respond to stress with Christlikeness rather than reacting to it as the world does.

God promises suffering, and we need to adjust our attitudes to accept it. But we need to keep it in perspective. As Jesus says, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first" (John 15:18).

And we mustn't forget God also promises blessings. "If we endure, we will also reign with him" (2 Timothy 2:12).

Discussion questions

- Do you tend to measure your actions against God's expectations or the world's?
- Do you react to stress or respond to it?
- When under stress, how can you remember to keep your focus on God?
- Are you a personal student of God's word? What could you do to carve out more time for reading the Bible?