

# Explore the Bible: Always Ready

September 20, 2016

• *The Explore the Bible lesson for Oct. 9 focuses on 1 Peter 3:13-22.*

During a time of church conflict several years ago, I sought the advice of an older man who has proven over the two decades I've known him to be one of the most mature and authentically spiritual people I've ever met. I wanted his guidance on how to respond to people who were attempting to shame me by, among other things, making painfully public false accusations against me.

I felt powerless to get them to stop or at least refute them. Pastors don't have the luxury of responding in-kind to those who seek to shame them publicly unless they have a career death wish and also are insensitive to the power of grace over retaliation.

My mentor-friend answered my question by telling me a story. One of the most encouraging things about his story is that he actually had one. He was living proof that even good people are not immune to "harm" for no good reason (v. 13). Peter's instructions actually offer a redemptive way of responding to those who attempt to shame or harm us, especially fellow believers. There is another, more effective and loving way, as modeled by Jesus himself.

My mentor's story was about an experience he once had in a professional meeting with several other high-ranking officials in the company where he was employed. His extremely angry accuser took over the meeting for several minutes, during which time he sought to discredit my friend by making several baseless accusations against him. I asked him what he said to the accuser in response.

"Nothing," he said. "Not one word." He sat there in humble confidence his

greatest power lay in not responding in-kind to the man's futile attempts to harm his well-proven professional integrity. He simply sat there and took the verbal beating. When the accuser finished his rant, without saying one word in any attempt to defend himself, my friend took the high road by returning to the original subject.

As it turned out, the longer my friend's accuser talked, the more foolish he looked to everyone else in the room. As he was spewing his misguided anger, he was only succeeding in discrediting himself. Sometimes, our greatest weakness is not a lack of integrity but a simple lack of patience—the willingness to let situations play themselves out without any input from us.

All my friend did was give his accuser the floor, along with enough extra rope to hang himself, as it were. That is essentially what Peter encouraged his readers to do. Don't join the fight, he was saying. It's virtually impossible to lose a fight you don't engage.

### **Respond rather than react**

Believers are not victims of anyone's anger. We certainly have to bear it from time to time, but that's not the same as simply rolling over as though we have no good power to respond. There also is a substantial difference between responding and reacting.

Reacting, especially in a knee-jerk fashion, rarely leaves room for God's grace to do its work. If our genuine desire is not to repay, to get others back, but instead to "sanctify" God in all things, we will have to learn the spiritual discipline of stepping out of God's way and trusting God to be God in all things.

In any conflict, our primary mission should not be to win. Our primary mission should be to glorify God. We only lose when we give into the natural human tendency to get even with those who have harmed us. We

will never be given a greater opportunity to prove what we truly believe about God than in how we respond to the harm others cause us.

This would be a great opportunity for the class to take a moment and, if possible, share some personal experiences of both kinds—when they've reacted instead of responding by leaving room for grace versus those times they've responded by getting out of God's way and letting grace prove itself. Love always wins, even if we personally lose.

### **Learn from those who want to harm us**

It's very, very difficult to accept the fact that, even in the most false and mean accusations, there is almost always a grain of truth. If we are willing, we can even learn from those seeking us harm. It's not possible to do so when our lips, out of prideful defensiveness, are flapping in vicious reaction instead of responding in gracious silence.

Some of my most meaningful friendships have been born out of times when I at least granted others the dignity of being sincerely heard—even when I didn't agree with what they said. It is possible for friendship to be born of conflict. If we think carefully, we will celebrate how it was in the conflict of the cross that our relationship of eternal hope with God was born.

It's virtually impossible for friendships to be formed when they are stillborn by our angry response to the accusations of others. Again, this would be a great opportunity for allowing class members to share personal experiences with both friendships born of conflict and friendships that never germinated to maturity because we were attempting to defend ourselves.

### **Respond with integrity**

The alternative to reactive defensiveness is to respond to the anger, even viciousness, of others by allowing our hope to express itself. It is possible to

respond to the harmful intentions of others with an integrity that speaks volumes about itself without our ever uttering a single word. Peter says, in response to the harmful attempts of others, we should let our integrity speak for itself through acts of “gentleness and reverence” (v. 16).

Revering another person is the act of acknowledging their value to the God who created them by the way we treat them, no matter how they treat us. To treat others with the same ugly reaction with which they initially treated us is to presume a status of holiness that is not ours. We are not God. We have no right to treat others as though we are positioned to judge them.

Every person, we must always remember, is a sacred gift of God to this world. The simple acknowledgement of that truth is the starting point for demonstrating the existence of “the hope that is in (us)” (v. 13). All retribution of the eye-for-an-eye variety is nothing more or less than solid evidence that we have no hope.

We only react to anger with anger when we are afraid any other person could possibly minimize the hope God alone can give. If we are people of hope, we will prove that by the way we, from our own undeserved cross of suffering, genuinely respond to undeserved treatment with the very prayer of Jesus from his own cross: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

In time, if we will stay out of God’s way and stay committed to our primary purpose of being agents of redemption in this world (2 Corinthians 5:11-21), we will stand in awe of what God can make of even the very worst relationships.

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