

The Traits of a Christian Neighbor - Scriptures are from the CSB

[Video intro: If possible, use this as the intro]:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=41&v=MDpHjRWbLvc&feature=emb_logo

A couple of years ago, the Aspen Institute began a national movement called, “Weave: A Social Fabric Project.” The catalyst was David Brooks, a conservative columnist for the New York Times (incidentally, he likes to say being a conservative columnist for the New York Times is like being the chief rabbi in Mecca ☺) Lana and I went to hear him speak about this last summer, and his central concept was that people desperately need community. We’re hard wired for it. He said, “The first core idea was that social isolation is the problem underlying a lot of our other problems.” **In other words, we need each other – and when communities break down and people become isolated, there are all sorts of problems that result. In fact, we discovered last week that Jesus brought this up 2000 years ago! He commanded us to love our neighbors.**

**Are your neighbors glad you’re next door?
If you moved, would they notice?**

We began a brief, two-week series last Sunday entitled “Love Where You Live”

It’s been amazing to hear some of your stories of how you’re sharing the love of God with your neighbors? **[List some examples, pictures of furniture, etc.]**

And the really exciting thing about it is we’ve gotten to share the series with about a dozen other congregations in the area. How great is that! About 7 years ago, **Mitch Maher**, the pastor of Redeemer Community Church in Cinco Ranch began to hear about a national movement of pastors called “Christ Together.” The central idea was that churches that found common ground in the Gospel of Jesus Christ could do more together than they could apart to reach our world. And Christ Together Katy was born with the goal that every man, woman, and child would have repeated opportunities to see, hear, and respond to the Gospel.

And dating back about 18 years before that, God put it on the heart of Dr. Charles Wisdom that there was ultimately one “Big C Church” in the Katy area, and we were knit together by our common purpose and common dependence on God. **The idea of “The Katy Church” was born.** It was the vision of Dr. Wisdom that God’s people would come together on a regular basis to pray for our community. And a group of pastors began praying weekly together... first in a Shoney’s restaurant and then in the Randall’s grocery store community room and then in different churches. That weekly prayer meeting

of pastors that started in a grocery store has continued unabated for 25 years straight!!! This series is one of those moments where we look back and realize how God has knit our community of churches together in an amazing way! And God is opening doors with our neighbors in an unprecedented way as well.

1 Peter 3:14-16 demonstrates how we should interact with the people around us as followers of Jesus Christ.

By the way, if you're one of our neighbors and just checking out things about God, I have good news for you: there is absolutely nothing I'm going to say today that we wouldn't want you to hear. There are no hidden agendas of our current emphasis calling all of us to "Love: Where You Live." We believe the heart of our faith is to love God with all of our hearts, and in turn to love our neighbors.

Let's look at our text: ***13 Who then will harm you if you are devoted to what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear or be intimidated, 15 but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.***

Context: Peter is speaking to Christians living in a culture that has a strong animosity toward the teachings of Jesus. He exhorts people to choose a better response than just shouting back to those who disagree. In the first 12 verses of the chapter, he calls for them to guard their words carefully, to remain humble, to seek peace. And then he offers what should make us different neighbors from those who might not know the love of Christ: We should not live in fear of all of the forces that threaten us. Instead, we should be ready to share the wonderful work that God has done!

We're to live a DIFFERENT way! And in verses 15 and 16, Peter challenges his readers with **three marks of a Christian neighbor**:

I. Extraordinary Hope

15 but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.

I say "extraordinary" because if it was typical optimism, who in the world would notice? Nope – the point is that when suffering comes to the Christian, there should be a different response.

That word “defense” is a translation of the Greek word, apologia. You might have heard people talk about “apologetics” – which is a fancy term for giving reasoned responses to arguments against faith. Every Christian can – and should – be confident in what he or she believes! But **Peter is specifically challenging us to be ready to give an answer FOR the HOPE in us.**

What is hope? It’s not the same as the way we use the word in Texas: “I sure hope it doesn’t rain today! I want to ride bikes later!” That’s a wish.

Hope in the Scriptural sense is an anticipation of something better because of what has been promised.

What Peter speaks of in the word “hope” here is similar to what Paul speaks about when he uses the term “Gospel.” We use that term so often we sometimes forget it wasn’t originally a “church word!”

“Gospel” is a Greek term that literally means “good news.” In the 1st century, if an emperor won a great battle which secured peace and established his rule, he would send heralds with a “gospel” to declare victory, peace, and authority.

Announcing victory.

That’s the key: The Gospel is the announcement that Jesus has overcome sin and death.

Just like this HOPE is not a grit-of-our-teeth hoping Christ’s work on the cross was enough or a crossing of our fingers hoping everything is going to be okay, the Gospel is not an invitation for you to come and help fight; but news about a battle that has already been won.

Which brings us back to being a good neighbor:

(I’ll write an illustration on a “flipboard” sheet of paper)

We’re called to be courageous about the Gospel – to “give a defense” when people say, “Why in the world are you so expectant in the middle of this crisis?” The point Peter is making in this passage is that there are really two ways that can go: someone can accept the wonderful news about Jesus, or reject that news.

The difference between these two outcomes is not up to us, but when we share our hope we are giving a tremendous gift: because we have given someone the opportunity to rest in that very same hope.

Which leads us to Peter's next marks of a good neighbor. A Christian should be known in the neighborhood for HOPE, but also his or her:

II. Undeniable Grace

Not everyone is going to like you. And this is CERTAINLY not indicating that we should do whatever it takes to be popular. But there should be a difference about us such that, even when people disagree, they respect us.

[Back to the markerboard] He gets into some things that I think are especially relevant to our focus on loving our neighbors right now – **Look at v. 16:** ***16 Yet do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that when you are accused, those who disparage your good conduct in Christ will be put to shame.***

[Write on the board: “Gentle”, “respectful”, and we could summarize that last portion “respected.”] We're not saved by our good works, but when we're saved, it DOES change our behavior. Our neighbors should see some fruit. Jesus put it this way in **Matthew 5:16:** ***“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”***

But I want you to notice something important here. **Peter's not just listing some good ideas. He's giving a warning.** Do you see that? **The verse begins with “yet.”** In other words, be careful that you don't miss the whole point. In order to understand this idea, we need to look at the danger of the opposite outcomes. **Peter's warning Christians, “Hey, you may suffer – and you may even suffer because of your hope! But don't blame your suffering on barriers you created yourself between you and your neighbors.”**

*****Have you ever ordered anything** online in which the packaging was a little suspect? When I order something from a reputable company, it comes in a nicely branded box, inside there's another clean box with a picture of the thing, and it's protected by foam that has been cast around the item, it makes me feel better about it. **So these positives (points to the three words) are like wrapping our Good News in a way that people will receive it. Now here's the catch: they may or may not receive it, but you've removed any unnecessary barriers.**

But if I order something online, and it's delivered in a smashed container put together with duct tape – or (for the sake of my art skills) let's say it's shipped in

a trash bag. It probably never get opened. So do you see what Peter is warning us with that “yet?” If you package a wonderful message in something that's profoundly unattractive, don't blame it on God.

In fact, I think if you're one of those neighbors checking us out today you'll give this a hearty “amen!” There's ANOTHER line Peter warns us about in which we don't even get to either of these outcomes: because we lose the right to even share the good news. **[Write this line on the board, and list the following words]** He's warning that if we have the greatest message in the world, but if we package it poorly, nobody is going receive the gift. act contrary to these exhortations, we're building barriers to the Gospel. What's the opposite of gentle? We come across as **harsh**. What's the opposite of respectful? **We're belittling**. What's the opposite of respected? We're **non-credible**. **I'll write here “No cred.”** When we don't listen, we come across as uncaring, or we lack integrity, nobody cares about any hope we have to share.

Listen: On one hand, if you're mocked for your beliefs every now and then, it means you stand for something! Good for you! On the other hand, if you're reviled, & stir people up constantly, that's probably an indicator that you're not doing it God's way. You're not being a neighbor. You're just being obnoxious. Don't blame it on God.

Look at that last part again: when you do all these things, what is one benefit? ***so that when you are accused, those who disparage your good conduct in Christ will be put to shame.***

The point is when you're a good neighbor, even others who disagree with you and your beliefs will come to your defense when you demonstrate the love of Christ to others around you. As author Art Lindsey said, “Love is the ultimate apologetic.”

- Jesus spoke about seeking the Kingdom first, and the early Church gathered weekly (and in Acts 2, daily!) with fellow believers. Would others know by looking at your routines that you are passionate about Jesus?
- Jesus spoke about demonstrating our love for Him by caring for those with the deepest needs. Would others know by watching your compassion that you love the Lord, and that you serve a God who cares about those who are hurting?

*****Back when most of us actually had home phones, my uncle gave my grandmother an answering machine for Christmas.** But when he called her, it never worked! He asked her. Grandma replied, “When I go out, I unplug it. If there is a storm, I don’t want it to get struck by lightning.” Grandma’s answering machine was sort of like the light of the Gospel. It’s only effective if we use it!

Remember, folks. Peter is telling believers to be ready to give a willing answer when people ask about one particular aspect of their lives: their HOPE.

I have an observation: the longer this whole episode goes, the less hope people have for the future. And there is going to be... there SHOULD be... a marked difference between those who are living in despair because their hope is in circumstances and those who are living with expectation because their hope is in Jesus Christ!

Listen: this message isn’t about going up to a stranger’s door today and making a presentation about your beliefs (unless God has told you to do that, and you already have the relationship and that person invites you to share!) **Peter’s point is that, when we remove the barriers, and we live with HOPE, the message of the Gospel is irresistible!**

For decades, the Church focused on slick presentations when it came to any conversation about those who are far from God. And you know what? I think it’s VERY important to be able to articulate what you believe. **But I’m convinced that if we’d get better at conversations than presentations, the Holy Spirit would make room for lots and lots of opportunities to share the hope of the Gospel.** When was the last time you had a good old fashioned, uninterrupted conversation with no agenda? Just because you wanted to learn more about someone’s story? That’s something that is profoundly missing in our culture – and I think most of our neighbors would agree.

Here’s another way to think about it: Many of us have been raised on the model of Christianity that says, **“Share the truth and live your life.”** What Peter is prescribing is a model of Christianity that says, **“Share your life and live the truth. Then be ready to give an answer to the inevitable questions about the HOPE you have!”**

When your neighbors look at you, do they see extraordinary hope? Do they see undeniable grace? How can you demonstrate those two?

Well, first of all, you can’t fake the hope. Do you have an expectation for the future because of Jesus Christ?

Second, what steps have you taken to “Love where you live?” What are some steps of obedience you might take this week as you love your neighbors well?

Let's bow for prayer.