

“Sanctify Christ as Lord”

1 Peter 3:13–22

27 April 2008, Easter 6A

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

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1 Peter 3:13–22

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you;

yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Prayer.

Do what is good and right, even though you may suffer, for you are blessed.

Recently, I began to receive blind copies of emails sent between the Devil and God¹. The first one was like this:

Dear God (ironic, isn’t it?!)—

Cut it out. I’ve had enough of your wholesale, industry wide blessings, involving all humankind. I’m doing my best to tighten the thumb-screws to people, and you continue to bless. I’ll be working my disease or tragedy strategies, all in an effort to worm my way into their lives, when you come along and organize your dimwitted followers to pray intercessions on their behalf. How am I supposed to compete with that? If this isn’t enough, you’ve been sending by your fan-boys

¹ Of course, this is a completely fictional account, created to draw attention to the message of First Peter.

with green bean casseroles and words of encouragement. Now you're doubling my caseload. I have to bring suffering to my original case, and now I have to add the new 'good Samaritan.' Forever your nemeses, Satan.

To which God replied:

Dear Satan–

You might want to rethink your strategy. Using the suffering card to flip my followers might get a few newbie Christians (who I'll undoubtedly win back at a later time), but in the long run, I suspect your return rate will be less than if you did a bulk mailing. I would have thought that you learned your lesson when you used the Romans to feed my followers to the lions and crucified them upside down. That worked out well, don't you think? Forever your Lord, God.

Do not fear, do not be intimidated, by those who cause you suffering.

Satan could let that last sarcastic remark go unchallenged. He wrote back:

Dear God–

Just because Christianity never spread further or faster than when I persecuted your blockheaded followers in those first three centuries doesn't mean that using the suffering strategy doesn't have merit. Sometimes I do it just to watch people squirm. Sometimes I do it knowing full well that my case will eventually end up in your camp, but I'll have hoodwinked someone else who is rather weak ... a neighbor who claims to be an atheist, a nephew who itching to spread their wings and taste the freedom of moving away from home, or the hot head prodigal who expects the world should be served up with a silver spoon.

Don't you see, God, I use suffering to scare the faith out of the weak? And the weaker they are, the less I have to turn up the heat. I can intimidate with a stare, a sneer, or a good old fashioned brush off. I can spot a weak faith a mile away: all I have to do is watch. Those who don't think it is important to act righteously, who don't believe morals make a difference, who don't follow your Father's laws or will, they fall behind the herd. As long as there are people who possess a weak faith, I will prey on them like a lion on a downed wildebeest. Used to be your fan boy, Satan.

To which God responded:

My beloved Satan–

You take far too much credit. You can't cause cancer, and you know it. You can't wreck starvation anymore than you can make a city bus run down a pedestrian. Yes, you can pour evil thoughts into the minds and hearts of the weak. You can even suggest cause and effect, but when it comes down to it, you're powerless to do anything other than to sit back and watch from afar.

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Cells mutate and become diseased without your help. People blow themselves up in a crowd for their own personal motives. It isn't like you pushed the button. Your fear and intimidation efforts are futile and pathetic.

My only regret is that few, precious few of my disciples spend the time to turn to scripture (in general), and to first Peter (in specific). When people learn, when they know, that suffering brings blessings, the sting is taken right out of the wound. The hurt is only temporary; a normal and natural reflex to pain. But my blessings are eternal. They are worked though my army of followers, each inspired by me, each blessed even as they are blessed. Forever Your Lord, God.

In your heart sanctify Christ as Lord. Set Jesus apart and make him the focus of our worship.

Satan couldn't let it go, and fired another round of emails:

Dear God-

It was fair, until you went to the Halloween store, bought a costume, and came to earth as Jesus. I could create the thoughts of cause and effect; that suffering was brought about as a result of sin. But when Jesus was allowed to take upon himself all the sin of the world, I just couldn't compete with that. That trumps my suffering card ten out of ten times. I'm just thankful that people have such short memories. It's like everyone is ADHD. After all, have you seen the cathedrals of Europe recently!

Listen, it isn't that I can blame you for not playing fair (I am, after all, the king of cheating), it's just the fact that you've given me pretty much nothing, not a scrap to feed my appetite with. The only thing left for me is to tear down Jesus. But, you know how hard that is. I can hook an occasional tie-dyed Jesus freak or a good "Lord's-name-in-vain" cuss every now and then. But, he is pretty much pure as the driven snow. Please advise. Your suffering, former servant, Satan.

God's response:

I am who I am; I've been this way since before time and I'll be this way until after time is no more. I created all there is. I gave you my laws. I gave you my word, my covenant, to bless you forever. But, this was not enough.

So, yes, I dawned the skin of Jesus and came to earth. And when I left, I left behind my Spirit to keep everything going. When people pray to me, they are praying to Jesus, and vice versa. No one knows more than you, Satan, that I require sanctification. I must be set apart, lifted up, and worshipped. I share the stage with nobody.

Don't pretend to be so surprised. It's been this way since Moses climbed up Sinai and returned with my first ten. I've given you plenty of opportunities to return to me. No one is forever lost as a result of my judgment. You and others are lost when you allow pride to hold you back from sanctifying me. Would you just for once, stop and ask for directions? Forever Your Lord, God.

I think it was God who was including me in the blind copy responses. Satan wouldn't ever allow any of us to see his weaknesses, would he?

The emails continued, and I've left many of them out. But they came to a climax with this last flurry. Satan wrote:

Enough already! ENOUGH ALREADY! I have enough shame heaped up on me. And it isn't as if you gave me any shame. It all came back to me, having started with me. I criticized. I went negative. And I went nuclear.

I have to admit, I was amazed at how many gullible, unsuspecting Christians there were who simply tossed it in and came to follow me. They are some of my best negative, 'ney' sayers these days; I just can't get enough of them. All I do is stand them up, brush them off, and send them back into the fray.

But I deserve a little respect, don't you think? I've kept up the pain, suffering, and negative criticism for two thousand years. Most stay less than seven years in a job these days. I throw in homosexuality, ordination of women, and Biblical inerrancy, every now and again, just to keep all things working towards my ends.

But shame is too much. And all you do is sign off with "forever your Lord" or without ever fighting back. At least, defend yourself. Save your sanctimonious platitudes for someone who cares. Bla, bla, bla, Satan.

God most recent reply:

I wouldn't let Peter defend me with a sword. I wouldn't stoop to defending myself when I died on the cross. And I'm not going to give you the satisfaction of a schoolyard brawl right here for all to see today. In fact I will never resort to sin to beat sin. One does not put out a fire by drowning it with gasoline.

Instead, as you know, it is my practice to live what I preach. You will never get anything out of me that isn't gentle and kind, loving and righteous. I will always be the God of healing and wholeness, a God more focused upon the repair than dwelling upon what got broke.

I gave myself as an example in the life of Jesus, and I continue to give my divinity as a gift and example to my people. I will remain the prevenient grace, the

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necessary prevention lubricant that keeps my Church rolling. I will continue to be the abundant grace, that will see my people through all suffering and fill their lives with blessings. And when the least of these comes to the end of their life, I will return the sanctification; I will lift them up and carry them through to the other side of my kingdom, and bring them unto myself with sanctifying grace.

Satan, I will never stop inviting you to return to me. Put an end to the shame. Come home. Always Your Lord, God.

Finally, God sent me this email, which I now forward to you:

Be prepared to answer critics of your faith. Respond to criticism with gentleness and reverence. Remain righteous. Shame will come to those who abuse you. It is my will that we are righteous, even if it results in suffering. Consider this as your example: Christ suffered, but remained righteous. It was my will that I suffered. I did it for you, to bring you to me. Love, God.

Amen.