

Does It Make a Difference?

1 Peter 4:1-6

West Valley Presbyterian Church, July 31, 2022

1. Introduction of passage: 1 Peter 4:1-6

A. "Since therefore" – Whenever you see "therefore" in Scripture, you have to ask yourself, "What's it there for?"

B. "Therefore" refers us back to 1 Peter 3:18, which Pastor Morgan preached on last week.

"For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God." That's the context for our passage for this week. We need to keep in mind that when Jesus brings us to God, that means that he is also taking us away from that which is not of God. As Pastor Morgan so clearly told us, baptism is a loyalty oath. It's a turning away from Satan, and a turning towards Jesus.

C. And that has practical consequences in the world, which Peter talks about in the passage we are studying today. 1 Peter 4:1-6.

"Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin), so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God. You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme. But they will have to give an accounting to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does."

2. A couple of phrases in this passage seem strange to us today, almost 2000 years later, though they would have been clear enough to Peter's audience when they were written. So let's take a look at those phrases, and then we can focus our attention on Peter's main point.

A. Verse 1, last part of the verse: "for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin." What does that mean? Suppose I got cancer and suffered in my body from the treatment. Does that mean that I am finished with sin because of my suffering? No, it doesn't. My own suffering doesn't redeem me! Jesus' suffering redeems me. "Since therefore CHRIST suffered in the flesh."

a. Our context verse also makes that clear. Remember that 3:18 says that Christ suffered for sins once for all. We don't save ourselves, not through suffering or any other way. Right?

b. What Peter means is that those who are baptized into Christ – which back then often did involve suffering, both socially and physically - are freed from sin's power. Once we are baptized, we belong to Jesus and we can't be forced into sin. The devil can't make us do anything. Jesus is our Lord, period.

c. That's why Peter goes on to say, in verse 2, "so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God." Let's be clear about this. Once we are baptized, it's God's rule we are under.

B. Next tricky phrase: Verse 6, beginning of the verse: "For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead." What does that mean?

a. What happens to unbelievers when they die is a serious topic. But that's not what Peter is talking about here. He's talking about what happens to Christians who have died before Jesus returns. I'm indebted to an excellent commentary by Edward Selwyn which carefully analyzes this passage.

c. Peter reminds his readers, in vv. 3 and 4, that when they converted, their friends and family gave them grief because their way of life changed. To their friends and family, what has happened makes no sense.

d. So Peter assures them, v. 5, that God will vindicate them; that the folks giving them grief will have to give an accounting of themselves to "him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead."

e. But what about those Christians who had already died before Jesus' return? What happens to them? Do they lose out? No, says Peter in v. 6; that's the reason that the gospel has been proclaimed even to those who are [now] dead. Even though they had been judged in the flesh the same as everyone else, they now live as the Spirit of God does.

3. The main point of what Peter is saying is that, Jesus changes things. We heard last week that when you are baptized, it's a declaration of loyalty. By the grace and calling of God, you are turning away from Satan and turning toward Jesus; and that means that your life will be different.

A. Reading through verse 3, it sounds like a frat party: "licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing and lawless idolatry."

a. But Peter isn't referring to a single party; he's referring to a way of life. Has anyone here ever had an alcoholic family member, or employee? Then you know that dealing with the vomit, the excuses, the sexual and other physical violence, the thievery, the lies, the irresponsibility – that's not fun. That's a waste, and it's an abuse of self and others whom God has created.

b. Or if you've ever struggled with

B. The good news is that we don't have to live that way. Peter's letter tells us that Jesus had changed these former Gentiles. And these were huge changes, total turnarounds. Their interactions with others were different. The way they used time and the other gifts of God were different. They were motivated by love rather than a desire for oblivion. They don't get involved any more in excesses of dissipation, as Peter puts it. Their former drinking buddies, understandably enough, don't like those changes; so they are saying terrible things about them. And, since it was Jesus who had changed their former sin partners, they also get mad at Jesus, and they blaspheme. Peter has to explain in v. 4 that their former friends are blaspheming because they are surprised. Sure they are. Because their lives are suddenly totally different.

C. So Peter reassures them. They are on the right path. And the former friends, he says in v. 5, will have to answer to God, who stands ready to judge the living and the dead.

4. So, what were these Christians doing now that they have been changed?

A. They did internal church things, similar to what we still do today:

a. gathering for worship and sharing meals (though then it was in members' homes),

b. figuring out how to support one another, and live as members of a minority religion that was soon going to lose its official government protection,
c. figuring out how they are going to organize and pass on the apostolic teaching.
B. And, they also did external things, which were wildly different from what the people around them are doing.

a. For instance, it was common in Roman times to expose unwanted babies – usually girls, since they required dowries and thus were a financial burden. It was common enough that we have a letter from a Roman soldier to his wife, written roughly a hundred years before Peter's first letter, that has made its way down to us. It says: **From Hilarion to Alis.** "Hilarion sends many, many greetings to his sister (that is, his wife) along with my lady Berous and Apollonarian. Listen, we are still in Alexandria. Don't worry about this – if they go home completely, I will stay in Alexandria. I am asking you and begging you to take care of the little child and when we are paid, I will send it to you right away. If you happen to be pregnant again, if it is a boy, leave it; if it is a girl, throw it out."

b. But Christians took the babies in, and cared for them. Even if they were girls. The neighbors noticed that. Most churches were located in cities, and there were plenty of people around to see.

c. And since they were located in cities, they had to deal with plagues. When plagues swept through, residents would flee to the country if they could, or hole themselves up if they couldn't. But Christians took care of the sick, even though they were putting themselves at risk. The neighbors noticed that.

d. Most people in Roman times didn't take the worship of the gods or of the emperor all that seriously. To them it was a 'can't hurt, might help' kind of thing. But most Christians did take it seriously. They saw a serious evil, idolatry that they would not participate in, even if their lives were threatened. Their neighbors noticed that too.

C. Jesus had changed the whole lives of these converts. The external things that they did were impossible for the neighbors to miss. And guess what. The church started to grow. Explosively. From a few thousand at Pentecost, to 10% of the entire Roman empire in less than 250 years, according to Wikipedia; and that was even before the church became legal.

5. I am not surprised to read in Scripture or in history that Jesus made a huge difference in the lives of those who turned to him, because I too have experienced the change that Jesus can and does make in people's lives.

A. I used to be a Unitarian research chemist before I committed myself to Jesus and was baptized at age 30. I was an unlikely convert because my life was actually pretty good by the world's standards. I was married to another Unitarian; we had two healthy and very lively young children; I had a great job with the Army Intelligence Agency which was important, it paid well, AND it was part time so that I could also be with my kids. Why would I want my life to change?

B. But God was drawing me, and my husband, to be closer to him. I knew that baptism would mean that my life would change, because God had let me know that. I didn't want change; things were pretty good as they were. But I wanted God more.

C. And so, the time came when Rob and I and our children were all baptized together as a family, and we joined the Presbyterian church.

D. And then sure enough, things changed; I went to seminary and became a pastor, and have remained one the rest of my life.

E. So I join my voice together with Peter's letter, I join my voice together with the whole Bible, I join my voice together with Christians down through the ages, to say that yes, Jesus does change lives; yes, Jesus does make a difference. Maybe you can say the same? If not, talk to Morgan. Or me. Or an elder. We'd be glad to listen.

6. If you can say that Jesus has made a difference in your life, then what do you think you might do about it?

A. The early church did internal things, like teaching and learning and organizing, so that they had something to offer their neighbors. And they also did the external things, like rescuing abandoned infants and nursing the sick and feeding the hungry and refusing to worship anyone or anything except God. Their neighbors noticed, and they responded.

B. If God could and did change the world through Jesus, if God chose to work through little groups of new Jesus followers to reach the world, if God could and did change hundreds and then thousands and then millions and then billions of people through Jesus, then do you think that God might still be able to make a difference through us?

C. Jesus has made a difference in you. Do you think Jesus can also make a difference through you? I think he can. I think he has. And I think he will. If Jesus could change the lives of people in our area through us 40 or 50 years ago, then can he work through us to change lives in our area today? I think so! Maybe we don't do the same things that we used to do, since we're not as young as we used to be. But that's OK. God's call involves change; maybe we do different things now.

D. Jesus makes a difference in our lives. Let's ask him to show us how to make a difference to those around us. Let's pray.