

*13Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?
14But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are
blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT
BE TROUBLED, 15but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always
being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an
account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;
16and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are
slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to
shame. 17For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for
doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. 18For Christ
also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might
bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in
the spirit;*

We'll have some fun with this. Because we're going to look beyond the obvious surface words that the church in the USA seems to believe and propose another reality.

In Houston Texas the largest mega church in the United States exists. They have 20000 + members and a TV audience in the 6 digit numbers. And the gospel, the good news according to their teaching is that Jesus and God want you to be healthy, wealthy, and whole. They offer healing and talk about ways you can be the best possible you, better than you probably ever imagined.

Sin is never mentioned. Only wholeness and healing and name it and claim it.

Now that's an extreme, I hope, to where we're at in this church, but I have to say, as I look around in this country, it doesn't seem so very extreme.

Evangelical christianity has become very "me" centered. It's all about me and what I can get. It's all about "**my**" life, and God is there to make **my** life better or even best, for me.

It's all about this life now, being happy, and fulfilled and trouble free. Having greener grass and a newer SUV than the folks down the street.

God smiles on **ME** and causes all this goodness and blessings to enrich **my** experience and **me** living **my** life; NOW. The holy trinity is I, myself, and me.

And oddly, because in America for a couple of centuries, we've been in an anomaly different from the experience of all christians for 20 centuries, it's an easy buy in.

I mean, the mega-church doctrine would be a hard sell in Syria right now. They must have a different God there. Or China. Or Russia. Europe moved on past a God who adds or subtracts anything. They've declared the whole idea dead.

But in America, we've got this god who is just beside himself trying to bless us and help us and be a friend to us, if we'd only let him. And if we would take a wheelbarrow full of money into his house, he'll repay us with a brand new SUV just loaded with many many wheelbarrows full of money.

Does any of this square up with the God of this book?

I've been amused for weeks now thinking about what in the world am I going to say about the opening lines of this verse. *13 Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?*

Because lately, if you're a baker or a photographer or a florist and you feel that to honor and affirm lifestyles and events that are in clear and easy violation of the commands of the God of this book, and you thus stand your ground because of your zeal for a God defined goodness, there are plenty of people who want to harm you.

One of the defining words in the verse is zeal. A zeal to honor and glorify God and His definition of righteousness as clearly defined in this book defines the limits of our actions.

So some christian some where says, "I love you and don't wish to dishonor you, but my zeal for God trumps my zeal for my business and what you want me to do and my conscience says, I can't do that and also

glorify my God. What you're asking for is clearly against what He says is honorable. In fact if I honor your wishes, it's like I'm agreeing that what you're doing is not sin, even though God clearly said it is sin."

"I'm not judging you. Your sin and what you decide to do is between you and God. But my conscience says that I must not affirm it. To do that might confuse others. So please find someone else to bake your cake, or take your photos, or arrange your flowers, I must for conscience sake decline."

And we're learning that our governing authorities can in fact inflict harm to us if we do that. Christians are being crushed daily it seems. I'm reading these stories all the time now.

One is breaking this morning as I write these things. Nursing homes that are attached to religious organizations in California must agree to a whole new set of LGBT declarations and services that are in direct conflict with anyone who believes the Bible is authoritative. No exceptions. No religious exemptions. If you can't sign on, get out of the business of caring for your elders.

In several states now religious organizations that sponsor foster parenting are under the same pressure. If you can't sign onto a host of LGBT demands for any kids that might fall under that particular sin, you can't be a foster parent. Christian sponsored adoption agencies are being forced out of performing those services.

It's the zeal thing. We're zealous for good. Zealous to honor the God who has revealed Himself in this book and zealous to keep His commandments. But the people who would punish us for doing that also have zeal. Lots of zeal. And their zeal is currently in the drivers seat. Our zeal is trumped. no pun intended.

The word for zeal is the same word used in the Bible for a group of political zealots in Israel who would do anything in order to bring harm to the gentile occupiers. In the battle to extricate Israel from it's gentile occupier's these zealots would stop at nothing. Murder and assassination was clearly just a casualty of these "freedom fighters."

Today we would call them terrorists. Christians are never to be terrorists, but I'm trying to give you an idea of the level of action defined by the word. Zealous for good. Not passive for good, zealous.

So what do we do with Peter's verse. *13 Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?* Because it seems like there are people standing in line who have more imminent power than I do, who would in fact be downright gleeful if they can cause me harm.

The Southern Poverty Law Center says that I and people who believe what I believe are in fact "haters". And we *should* be harmed. Punished. Taught who is in charge. And they're very zealous about it. Very righteous . . . in their own eyes. George Clooney just gave them 1 million more dollars to go and punish people like me.

So then, by current definitions that most evangelicals in this nation would without much thinking ascribe to, this is a problem verse. It doesn't hold up. If I prove to be zealous for good, I may in fact be harmed. Put out of business. Fined. Suffer loss. Harmed. What's up with that.

But as we read into this, and study the situation that these folks were living with, it becomes obvious. Peter's opening statement is an axiomatic statement. An axiomatic statement. Like "a penny saved is a penny earned." And many others like that. A general truth. "Honesty is the best policy." "Do unto others and you would have them do unto you."

And we could make that statement today. *13 Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?* is just an axiomatic truth. It's just harder to be mad at someone who is known for always being the person who is positive. They're always somewhere helping somebody.

A couple of examples come to mind. Read the book of Daniel, and his overriding character comes through as you read the book. A positive statesman. And some trickster passes a law that sounds good and Daniel must go to the lion's den, but the king grieves. Everybody grieves because how could you not love Daniel.

If you read about early martyr's, a name from the second century always comes up. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Again, one who was beloved by everyone for doing good continually, but he fell under the orders of the Roman emperor and was arrested for his beliefs.

Those present begged him to recant his christianity because they loved him. But he said, "*Eighty and six years have I served Him and he has never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King who has saved me.*" And he was burned at the stake while the very onlookers who were required to do it grieved at the loss of him.

Still, the world responds to positive goodness. It didn't prevent Peter's death or Paul or Timothy's death, or Polycarp's death, and even Daniel was only spared because God tamed those lions that day.

And this is where the modern church needs to move beyond the shallowness of "I, myself, and me", green grass and SUV, and consign yourself to the truth that for 20 centuries the church has been at odds with the world. The world hates the church. We are enemy combatants living within the territory controlled by those who hate us.

Actually they don't hate us, per se, but they hate our God and His claim of sovereignty over them. They love their sin and especially their self sovereignty, self rule, and they hate a God who says, nope, I own you and you will in fact bow the knee to me. Every knee will bow. Some to everlasting life, and some to everlasting terror and punishment.

They hate God and since they can't get at Him direct, they take out their rage on His elect. His people.

And what's weird in this war mentality image I've been using is that we are their enemy, because we have bowed the knee to God and His authoritative book, we are public enemy number one, but they are not our enemies. They are our mission field. They hate us, but they are beloved to us and by us. It's a strange circumstance.

Other religions, like Islam draw the distinction between them and us,

and they are commanded to kill anyone who isn't on their side. Just the opposite is true in christianity. We are commanded to love our enemies. We are commanded, we saw it last week, to not repay insult for insult, evil for evil.

It's an odd war. A very strange war. The world can strike my cheek and my orders are to give them the other one. The world can force me to carry their stuff for a mile and I am commanded to carry it for 2. The world can take my coat away and I'm instructed to give them my shirt also.

Who fights a war that way. Our enemies are beloved to us . . . if perhaps God may save them. Listen to Jesus giving us our battle plan; Gather around troops. This is how we're going to engage. This is how the battle will be fought. Are you ready?

Luke 6:27 "But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 29 "Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. 30 "Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back. 31 "Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. 32 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 "If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 "If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. 35 "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. 36 "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

In 1 Corinthians 4:12 Paul says; *We work hard with our own hands. When we are vilified, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it;*

And in Romans 12:14 he says; *Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse*

I'm trying to unskew your vision. The church in America has an unrealistic view of how the world should treat us because of 200+ years of living in a bubble . This American experiment of religious liberty where christianity defined the states morals but the state had no power to interfere with the church is coming to a rapid close.

We are waking up each day to another loss. We are returning to biblical norms where the reality is that we are enemy combatants living within enemy territory. Of course the world wants to harm us. In fact the more distinct the church is from the surrounding world, the more in the target crosshairs we find ourselves.

So again, we return to Peter's axiom. *13 Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?* And I want to come at this from the perspective of those to whom it was originally written.

These are christians who are living in the days of the first general persecution. Nero burns down Rome and the blame is shifted to the Christians. Christians bad. Christians are Rome burners. They should be eliminated. They hate Rome. They hate Ceasar. They refuse to bow the knee to the things that the rest of the world bows to. They are obstinate worshippers of some foreign God. They should be systematically punished and if not made to recant their obstinate thinking, they should then be eliminated.

And that was happening. Eventually Peter and Paul would both succumb to this first great persecution. And Peter comes along, and it's almost as if he's saying his axiom, tongue in cheek. It's almost like he's using satire. *Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?* Yeah, right Peter.

In chapter 4:12 he says; *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.* I hope that sounds strangely familiar to what I've been saying this morning. Fiery trial is normative for enemy combatants operating within enemy territory.

So, let's look again at this word "harm". *Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?* I think it's satire. I think it's tongue in cheek. But I also think there is a deep underlying truth here that we need to get an excellent handle on; **if indeed** it should please God for us to undergo some of the same trials that have been normative for 20 centuries, everywhere else but here.

I'm going to let Paul define Peter's underlying truth for us. A very familiar passage. This would be a good one to commit to memory in it's entirety in case they come and take our Bibles away for a book burning. Romans 8

31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

This is battle speak. This is the coach encouraging the battered warriors to go on back out to the field and engage.

32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? 33 Who will bring a charge against God's elect?

That sounds just like Peter. Who is there to harm you if you are zealous for doing good. Who will bring a charge against you if God is on your side.

God is the one who justifies; 34 who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

We are in a war with the whole fallen world. They are constantly bringing their condemnations upon the church. Paul laughs. God is on our side. Bring it.

35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

Stop right there. Now we're down to the bottom line. If our treasure is our McMansion. If our treasure is our car collections or cameras or toys

or leisure or retirement or stocks and bonds and gold, or shockingly even our families, then the world can harm us. The world can take all of those things away.

Paul's premise and Peter's premise is this. If Christ is your treasure above and beyond all things, who is there who can harm you? I need to say that twice. This is America 2017. This is the church's achilles heel. Paul's premise and Peter's premise is this. If Christ is your treasure above and beyond all things, who is there who can harm you?

The world can spoil and take away every other treasure. All of it. Gone in an instant. But if your treasure is having Christ, He is your treasure, the world is helpless to take your treasure away from you.

35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

You realize of course that Paul's question is rhetoric. The answer is in the question. The question leaves no room for multiple answers. A rhetoric question has an obvious answer. Will tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword or any other thing this world can throw at us be able to separate us from our treasure if our treasure is having Christ? No. NO! **NO!**

What about death? What if the world's answer to our zeal for doing good is to kill us. I mean, you might survive all of those other things, but what if the world kills you?

36 Just as it is written,

“FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG;

WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED.”

37 But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to

separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That's the definitive answer to Peter's question. Who is there to harm you? Paul has exhausted every possibility, on this planet or in the heavens, in the spirit world or in the physical world, things unseen and things seen.

If your treasure is having Christ, owning Him, fellowshiping with Him, living for Him, then you are impervious to harm. Who is there to harm you, Peter says. Paul says, nothing in the created universes can harm you.

37But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.

Everything revolves around this word harm. Loss. What can the world take away from us. And the answer is everything. Everything can be lost. Houses. Families. Stuff. Even our lives can be snuffed out. One thing they can't take away. The Lord Jesus Christ has chosen me out of this world. He lives inside me. He indwells me by His Holy Spirit, and He has given me an inheritance that fadeth not away, it is kept by the power of God, for me, in another world.

I have the downpayment for the treasure, the inheritance, living inside my heart. Bring it world. Try to take that away. My book says that not only am I a conqueror, but the odds on my side, are overwhelming. There's no mathematical equation big enough to define my odds of winning in this war. If God is for us . . . who can be against us.

What a verse! What a truth! I never dreamed that we would not get past this one truth this morning. Let's finish up our thoughts with vs. 14 and just the first part of vs 15

14But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, 15but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts,

Verse 14 is the reality behind Peter's axiomatic tongue in cheek satire. Yes it's true that generally, the world doesn't punish people who are

zealous to do good. But our reality surpasses what is true for the rest of the fallen world.

Jesus said, If the world hated me, why would you expect anything different? Assuming we belong to Him. Assuming He has purchased us out of this world by His blood.

Jn. 15:18“ If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 19 “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. 20 “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.

Suffering is normal for all christians. Even perhaps us, before it's all said and done. If it comes, don't be surprised. But Peter goes a step beyond. He says, *14But even if you **should** suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed*

Jesus said it's normal because we are no longer citizens of this world, but He also said;

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

But the world hates peacemakers. Peace with God is war with this world. So Jesus then says;

10 “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The promise is that if we endure hardship and loss now in this world, for

His glory and His name, our reward in heaven will be great.

William Devane says "*What's in your safe?*" The world's message to the rest of the world is; we're on an unsustainable platform. Our economy is built on a house of cards. You better buy gold and put it in your safe, so when the big wind comes and blows this house of cards down, you'll have something tangible.

Not bad advice really, if this world is all you've got. Here's how gold works. It always has a fairly set purchasing value. So if my great grandfather saved up for a new Model T in 1917, \$265 bucks, and he says to himself, I think I'll buy me some gold instead, so he buys whatever ounces of gold you could buy in 1917 for \$265. About 13 ounces.

He puts it in a safe in Tonopah Nevada and he doesn't tell anyone the combination. He dies. But my brother can crack safe's so 100 years later we open it up and get the 13 ounces out. What can we buy with 13 ounces of gold. We sell the gold for \$17,400 and we can buy a crummy cheap car.

The Model T was a crummy cheap car. All the gold did in the safe was retain the power to buy approximately the same thing as it could have bought in 1917. It didn't really even make interest. It came out with the same purchasing power it went in with.

Jesus says, I've got a better deal for you. Gold is what we pave the streets with up here. I've got a treasure that is unfathomable. And if you suffer there to gain the treasure here, it gets even more unfathomable. **Great is your reward in heaven!**

Peter says; BONUS!! *14But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, **you are blessed.*** Suffering for Christ's sake here is a windfall. Big circular gold driveway at your mansion in heaven. Plus a gold tennis court. Suffering for Christ is a windfall. A bonus. A huge blessing if it should come. An indescribable honor.

Maybe we're praying wrong. We pray for God to forestall suffering

here. Keep that from us. Maybe we've got that just backwards. Suffering now is a windfall, a bonus of treasure . . . later. In heaven. With Jesus.

Then Peter says something really interesting. *AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED,*

Here he quotes from the old testament. This is a quote and if you understand the circumstances behind this quote it really gives it a wealth of depth.

The quote is from Isaiah and it's so rich and so relevant that my first inclination is to wait until next week and dive into this even deeper. Here's the quote from Isaiah 8

*10“Devise a plan, but it will be thwarted;
State a proposal, but it will not stand,
For God is with us.”*

11For thus the LORD spoke to me with mighty power and instructed me not to walk in the way of this people, saying,

*12“You are not to say, ‘It is a conspiracy!’
In regard to all that this people call a conspiracy,
And you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it.*

*13“It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy.
And He shall be your fear,
And He shall be your dread.*

The background for the passage was that Assyria was sweeping over the entire earth like a tidal wave, conquering everything in their path.

The northern kingdom, the 10 tribes who had separated themselves from Judah in the south had formed an alliance with Syria. We can't take on Assyria alone so we've made an alliance with our enemies. Syria was no friend of Israel, but they have a common enemy and together there is perhaps enough strength to come against them in battle.

Israel and Syria approached Judah, King Ahaz, and said, you need to join with us in our alliance. Together we can take on Assyria. Alone, none of us can stand.

But Isaiah the prophet has brought this message to King Ahaz.

*10“Devise a plan, but it will be thwarted;
State a proposal, but it will not stand,
For God is with us.”*

11For thus the LORD spoke to me with mighty power and instructed me not to walk in the way of this people, saying,

*12“You are not to say, ‘It is treason!’
In regard to all that this people call treason,*

The word for conspiracy is also the word translated "treason". King Ahaz told Israel and Syria he would not join them. And they in turn began to shout "treason!" King Ahaz is a traitor. And they threatened to invade Judah. Since Judah won't join in their alliance, we'll invade and conquer Judah.

Isaiah says; *And you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it.*

*13“It is the LORD of armies whom you should regard as holy.
And He shall be your fear,
And He shall be your dread.*

The church in America is under stress. Alliances are being formed. The church is under pressure to join in an alliance with this world. Different enemy, different time, but the situation is identical.

The government of the United States is telling the church of God, we will come against you with force and crush you if you do not form an alliance with us over these issues. What issues. Lots of issues, but the LGBT thing seems to be at the forefront of the battle right now.

Agree with the US government about the LGBT agenda, or get crushed. But the real argument is the book. Our book has to go. Because the book is clear, crystal clear on all of these agendas that put us in harms way with our government.

What is the final authority over morality? Is it the secular government of the United States, or is it this ancient book we hold in our hands? That is the battle line in the sand.

We can see the battle approaching us. We can hear the marching and see the dust of the approaching army. We hear the drums beating. The forces coming against us are huge. And quite frankly, it's only human to evaluate the coming battle with some fear and dread.

What do we do? Well, what we're seeing is that much of what calls itself the church is forming alliances with the enemy. The foundations for the church making an alliance with the secular world are in christian liberalism. The book is not God breathed, it's just a book. The book has no final authority, in fact we have the authority to say what parts of the book are valid, and what parts are not.

So the church, or at least part of the church, the old line denominations are leading the charge, and the liberal church is forming an alliance with the secular world. They've waived the white flag. And in fact they have been absorbed by the secular world and just to make everything confusing, the so-called church is going to be at the forefront of the battle shouting that we who hold onto this book are in fact the traitors!

Just like Syria and Israel shouting at King Ahaz that he is a traitor if he doesn't join their alliance. It's a fascinating parallel. Isaiah's words jump off the page to us in 2017!

Isaiah says; *And you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it.*

*13 "It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy.
And He shall be your fear,
And He shall be your dread.*

There's nothing new under the sun, is there. Choose you this day, whom you will serve. We see the battle closing in. It's scary. But the fact is, God Almighty, the Lord of hosts; armies of angels, God the mighty warrior in battle says, don't fear them, fear me.

It fits rather spectacularly with Peter's final argument and we'll close with this thought.

15but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts,

Which side of the battle will you join? We see the dust approaching. It's not here yet. There's time to decide which side we'll join in this battle. Some of the so-called church has already caved. They're mixed with the world, making some of the dust as the march gets closer. Those who claim to be the church will engage in battle against the real church.

13Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?

We looked at that. When engagement is impossible to avoid, the world can definitely inflict harm. We can lose everything. By this world's standards, everything, including our lives. Everything but one thing. One supreme treasure they can never take away from us.

Where will we be found in the battle if it arrives before He takes us home. Peter says *but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.*

If the battle comes, who's going to be your commander. Who is going to be your Lord. *but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.* If we make Christ our supreme treasure. Far above any of the treasure this world has to offer, including life itself, then we will go into the battle knowing there may be temporal loss, but there can never be ultimate loss.

That battle has already been fought and won. What we need to do is prepare now for engagement. What's in your safe? Gold is useless stuff. Christ is the only treasure that will remain untouchable. *Sanctify Him as Lord in your hearts.*