Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Back in the olden days, sports teams had one coach. But professional teams, like the All Blacks, now have a head coach, a forwards coach, a backs coach, a scrum coach, an attack coach, and a defense coach. And it is the job of the defense coach to instruct the players about their position on the field and tackling technique and securing the ball at the rucks and mauls. And of course, sometimes, if players get defense right, it can quickly become offense or attack play.

Well, with the passage before us today, Peter is both our defense and offense coach! As you can see in verse 15, he wants us to be able to “*make* *a* *defense*.” But this was for the sake evangelism. He knew that the Lord could use defending the faith to bring others to faith in Christ. Peter had seen this happen with himself and the other apostles. But even if it did not, Christ was honoured through the witness of His followers.

And this defensive strategy was sorely needed in Peter’s day. As we have noted in recent weeks, the early Christians made some false assumptions about Christian living that put them ‘offside’ with their neighbours and the governing authorities. They assumed that their new position in Christ left them free to rebel and rise up and resist laws and societal norms. So, they set fires to hasten the end of the world. They assassinated wicked governors. They broke prisoners out of jail. Slaves ran away from their masters. Wives left their unbelieving husbands. They practiced a kind of ‘in your face’ Christianity that left a really bad taste in society’s mouth. And so, believers needed a better ‘defensive strategy,’ which Peter provides in this passage.

And this ‘defensive strategy’ is just as needed today. For the fact is that there are many parallels between the society that the Christians Peter originally wrote to lived in and the society that we live in today. Roman society was a pagan or unbelieving society. Sexual immorality, in all its forms, was everywhere. There was devastating poverty but also people who were massively rich. There were racial tensions. There was infanticide – the killing of unwanted babies. There was violent crime and drunkenness. Democracy was crumbling around the edges and tyrants were seizing control. And we see many of these same things around us today, also. But back then, Christians faced overt persecution, while our society has been more influenced by and accepting of Christianity. But that is rapidly changing; our society is moving fast towards paganism and unbelief, and we can expect that persecution will soon follow; we will face increased hostility from, and greater restrictions imposed by, a hostile, ungodly culture.

So today, **we have the ‘defensive strategy’ for life in a hostile, unbelieving world**. And we will hear that we are to be **Zealous for Good**, **Ready to Suffer**, and **Prepared to Answer**; they will be our three points. And brothers and sisters, this is really important instruction. We need to heed these words, so that we are ready when persecution comes.

1. So, first of all, we are to be **Zealous for Good**. And we see this in verse 13: “*Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?*”
   1. And in many respects, these words of Peter are **a general truth** – we all like good people; we much prefer good behaviour over bad behaviour. For example, last week we heard about and saw video of the party on the North Shore that broke lockdown rules. And everyone in New Zealand was horrified by that selfish and decadent behaviour. And it was the same with the two people who used fraudulent paperwork to leave Auckland and head to Wanaka – we were all disgusted by what they did. And it is the same with MIQ escapees and large protest crowds ignoring social distancing rules; most kiwis are brassed off by that behaviour. But on the positive side, when she was alive, one of the most loved and admired persons on the planet was Mother Teresa. She was a Roman Catholic Nun who lived and worked in India, running all sorts of programs for the poor and the sick. And she was universally loved and admired because she did good. So, as a general truth, we like good people.
   2. And in the sermon introduction, I described how the early Christians initially lived. It was a rebellious, in your face style of living. And there was a name for this style of living. It was called being a **Zealot**. You might remember that one of Jesus’ disciples was known as “*Simon the Zealot*.” Zealots were basically the Jewish or Christian equivalent of today’s Islamic terrorists; they were ‘religious fanatics’ who rebelled and disrupted and caused all sorts of havoc and mayhem in society to further their cause. And you boys and girls will remember that when Jesus was arrested, Peter took up a sword and hacked away at the arrestors. And that is exactly the sort of thing that Zealots would have done, but precisely what Jesus told Peter that he and all believers must not do. So, Peter knew all about Zealots. And look how he puts verse 13: “*Now who is there to harm you if you are* ***zealous*** *for what is good?*” Do you see his point? If you want to be zealous about something, let it be for doing good!
      1. In **Romans 12:9** we read, “*Abhor what is evil, hold fast to what is good*.” **Romans 12:21** says, “*Do not overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good*.” **Romans 13:3** says, “*Do what is good, and you will receive* [the governor’s approval].” **Romans 15:2** says, “*Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, to build him up*.” And **Romans 16:19** says, “*I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil*.” And that’s just Romans! The epistles are full of instruction about doing good. In fact, in **James 1:27** we read that “*religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction*.” So, pure religion, according to James, is doing good.
      2. And so, we are to devote our time and attention to doing good. Be a ‘Good Samaritan’ to your neighbours, Jesus commanded. Be a good citizen. Be a good slave or master or wife or husband or plumber or lawyer or school-teacher or student. Do good works. Look after the poor and the hungry and the addicted and the sick and the orphans and the widows. Be *zealous* for good.
2. But in the second place, we are to be **Ready to Suffer**. And we see this in **verses 14a and 17**; verse 14a says, “*But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed*,” and verse 17 says, “*For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil*.”
   1. And here we are alerted to the fact that even though we strive to be zealous for good, that does not mean that the world will always love us. And again, let’s remember the theme words of Jesus for this whole letter of Peter: “*In the world you will have tribulation …* *If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you*.”
      1. In Jesus’ day, one event that really angered the Pharisees was when Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath. Think about that, for a moment! Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath! The Sabbath was all about *Him*! And what He was doing was healing someone – something truly good! But at that moment, they hated Jesus!
      2. And after a lifetime of just doing good – healing people, raising the dead, and delivering people from demons – where did it get Jesus? Crucifixion! And we are so thankful that He went to the cross, for that is our salvation.
      3. But the key point here is that sooner or later, even though we too may be zealous for doing good, we will be misunderstood or falsely accused or just flat out hated and despised, and we will suffer.
      4. And brothers and sisters, this is coming, fast. The so called “hate speech” and “conversion therapy” legislation that our government seems determined to bring in will put us ‘offside’ with the law. If a child talks to their parents, or a church member talks with a fellow member or an elder, about struggles with gender dysphoria or same-sex attraction, and they ask for prayer and counselling to resist temptation and to love what the Lord holds before us as good and noble and upright, and we offer that prayer or counselling, we will be liable for arrest, because we are stopping them from being what the world says is just fine. And, what I have just said about this will almost certainly soon be illegal to say.
      5. And more and more people in society will not understand or appreciate what the Bible teaches, no matter how respectfully we express it, and no matter how much good we might be doing in all sorts of areas. As the Lord said, “*If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you*.”
   2. Now, note what Peter says here: Verse 14: “*if you should suffer* ***for righteousness’ sake***,” and in verse 17 – “*It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil*.” You see, the Christians of Peter’s day, who were lighting fires and assassinating governors and helping prisoners escape, were arrested and imprisoned and fined and beaten, and some were even killed. And they viewed this as persecution. But Peter is clear here, that was not persecution; that was exactly what they deserved for their evil behaviour. Jesus said, “*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you … and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High*.” He said, “*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven*.” It is when we are persecuted *for doing what is right*, or persecuted *under false charges*, or persecuted *out of hatred or envy* that the Lord is pleased. And it is persecution of this sort that He promises to reward.
      1. And so, for example, as a church, we have obeyed lockdown laws and not gathered for worship and fellowship. Now, we could have ignored the rules and just carried on gathering, and, when charged or imprisoned, claimed persecution. But as a session, we believe that the lockdown laws were about public health, not persecution of Christians. So, to have ignored those laws would have been contrary to what is commanded in ch. 2:13. And we would then have been suffering for doing evil and not for doing good.
      2. But as I have explained in the bulletin, the situation is changing as lockdown drags out, and there may come a time when we have to consider a different response. But putting lockdown laws aside for a moment, if the government were to ever target Christianity and forbid public worship, as happens in China and North Korea, for example, then we would certainly have to disobey and be prepared to face the consequences. And that would be suffering for righteousness’ sake.
   3. And all of this needs to be **very real** for you and me. You must say to yourself, I will face tribulation. I will be persecuted. I must be ready to suffer for my Saviour.
   4. But by way of encouragement, notice also the **last part of verse 14**: “*If you should suffer for righteousness sake,* ***you will be blessed****.”* And this does not mean long life and health and continual happiness. It didn’t mean that for the Lord Jesus or for the Apostles, and it hasn’t meant that for many persecuted believers. But as we shall see later in Peter’s letter, our Father in heaven greatly values and generously rewards those who suffer as His Son suffered. And this is because it is only love for Christ that can lead a person to repay good for evil and to pray for their abusers and to endure prison.
3. And that brings us to our third point, which is that we are also to be **Prepared to Answer**. And we see this in verses 14b-16.
   1. When we read the passage from Isaiah 8 earlier in the service, did you notice the word “**conspiracy**”? We read, “*Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy*.” So, it appears that conspiracy theorists are nothing new! Although, how they came up with their theories back then, when they didn’t have Facebook and the ability to “do their own research” is anybody’s guess :-) But the reason that we read that passage in Isaiah is actually these words: “*Do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord of hosts, Him you shall honour as holy. Let Him be your fear*.” For Peter clearly had those words in mind as he wrote: “*Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy.”*And Peter also heard Jesus say, “*Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell*.” So, believers are commanded here not to fear, or be troubled by, their persecutors.Ifyou trust in the Lord, and revere and honour Him, and you believe His promises to bless you in times of persecution, and ultimately, if death should come, to bring you to Himself in heaven, then you will be courageous and unwavering in the face of persecution.
      1. In the 16th century, the Pope issued a Papal bull against 41 of **Martin Luther**’s teachings. And Luther was called on to renounce those teachings or be excommunicated, which, in those times, usually also meant the possibility of torture and death. Well, Luther burned the papal bull document in public, and told those present that the Pope had renounced the gospel. Well, as you can guess, this did not impress the Pope, so he excommunicated Luther. And then the Emperor summoned Luther to appear before him and he was again asked to renounce his views. And having been given a day to consider this requirement, Luther again appeared before the Emperor and refused to renounce his views. He stated that his conscience was captive to God’s word, and until he could be proven wrong, from Scripture, he stood by what he had written. And it is almost certain that Luther would have been kidnapped and killed if he had not been spirited away by friends in high places, so that he could continue the work of the Reformation.
      2. And in the 17th century, in England, it was only possible to preach if you had a government license. And licenses were only given to preachers who were sympathetic to the Roman Catholic Church. So, men like **John Bunyan**, who wrote ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’ preached without a license, and were arrested and imprisoned for doing this.
      3. And how could men like Luther and Bunyan stand up against Emperors and Popes and accept imprisonment and even death? Because they did not fear their persecutors and instead feared and honoured the Lord Jesus. Now, I want to add here that this does not mean that they had no anxiety or apprehension, or upset stomachs and cold sweats and sleepless nights. They were human, after all! But honouring Christ was more important to Luther and Bunyan than keeping their freedom or fearing the authorities and the punishments they could impose.

* 1. And it **needs to be the same with you, believer**. You are to be zealous for good and ready to suffer for righteousness’ sake. And when it comes, you are to be always “*prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”*
     1. And the Greek word translated in our Bibles as “*make a defense*” is *apologiav*, from which we get the English term ‘**apologetics**.’ And apologetics is defending or explaining Christian beliefs. It can refer to a formal defense in court, such as we read earlier with Paul in **Acts 26**, but it can also be the informal response we all give to our workmates and neighbours when they ask us about why we believe what we believe and why we behave as we behave.
     2. And we could devote a whole sermon just to the topic of apologetics, but while Peter’s main point is that we should make the most of every opportunity that arises, we can also infer from his words that we do well to **prepare and practise** our responses to the questions we may be asked, so that we are ready when the occasion comes.
        1. I mean, no lawyer worth their salt stands up in court and tries to come up with a defense on the spot; they practice and rehearse exactly what they will say if this point comes up or that matter needs to be addressed. And so should we.
        2. And this is one of the blessings of being a church of **creeds and confessions**. Most questions that we might be asked have been asked before and have been answered in the creeds and confessions. And they are all laid out for us, with Bible references!
        3. But there are also **books, DVDs, and websites** about apologetics. And the Adult Discipleship hour class does some apologetics work. And we need to make use of tools like these so that we are “*always ready to make a defense*.”
  2. But notice also what Peter says about how we do apologetics: “*Do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame*.”
     1. One common temptation for believers who are put on the spot is to lose their cool and get angry, and to lash out with their fists or their words. And of course, even if the reason they were first accused was false, now their persecutors have legitimate reason to prosecute them further. And sadly, many believers have given in to that temptation. But what we have to recognize is that such opportunities are opportunities for evangelism. And nothing confuses or upsets persecutors more than when their victims do not hit back or lash out. And we need to understand that the Spirit uses situations like this to make a powerful impression on persecutors.
     2. Now, that does not mean that conversion will always be the result, just as we saw with the response of Agrippa in Acts 26, but “*with gentleness and respect*,” Paul appealed to Agrippa’s conscience. And nothing about *how* Paul said what he said or *how* he behaved gave Agrippa the opportunity to accuse Paul of further wrongdoing. And on Judgment Day, assuming Agrippa did not repent and receive Christ later in life, he will acknowledge that Paul was falsely accused, and that although he heard the truth from Paul, he chose to reject the gospel and deserves eternal condemnation. And he will see Paul honoured by the Lord!
     3. And so, again, it is only if you truly honour Christ as your Lord, and you do not fear your persecutors, and you choose the honour of Christ on Judgment Day over escaping hardship, that you will seize every opportunity given you to share the gospel with persecutors or interrogators.
  3. Well, by way of conclusion, the influence of Peter’s letter and other New Testament letters on how early Christians lived back then was remarkable. And it wasn’t long before society’s attitudes about Christianity changed from suspicion to appreciation. And we know this from historical documents of the time, like a letter written to a man called Diognetus, sometime around AD 130. It says of Christians,

[They] *display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others and yet endure all things as if foreigners … They marry, as do all others; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed … They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and restored to life. They are poor yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of and yet are justified; they are reviled and bless; they are insulted and repay the insult with honour; they do good yet are punished as evildoers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred. To sum it all up in one word -- what the soul is to the body, that are Christians in the world.*

So, will the same be said about us as Christians today? Are you zealous for good, ready to suffer, and prepared to answer? This is the Lord’s ‘defensive strategy’ for life in a hostile, unbelieving world. And may the Lord use our witness just as He used the witness of those first Christians. Amen.