

How to Handle an Atheist

Christianity 101, Part 3

1 Peter 3:13-17

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

How should a Christian approach talking to an atheist? There are many around us these days and they often attack what we believe. Christians are called to be salt and light in the world, so we often think we need to evangelize and convince people of their need for Jesus. The problem is, no one is ever argued into the faith. God is the only one that can draw people and save them. As Peter explains in this passage, Christians do not necessarily need to be great arguers. Instead, they need to be willing and able to share their testimony about what God has done and what He is currently doing in their life. The way a Christian should live his life is to be distinct from the world due to the hope of Christ and the redemption they have through him.

Discussion Points:

In 1 Peter 3:15, it talks about the need for every believer to be ready to make a defense of something.

- How have you heard this verse taught in the past?
- Have you ever taken this verse to mean you need to know answers to questions raised against Christianity?
- According to this verse, what is the responsibility of the believer?
- Is the defense of the hope within you done with actions, words, or both?

The context of believers displaying a unique hope is through trials. Suffering brings us to an opportunity to display our hope in Christ.

- In what ways do Christians suffer?
- Are the sufferings of Christians always different than those of unbelievers?
- What is the unbeliever's reaction to suffering in their life?
- How is the reaction of a Christian to suffering different than that of an unbeliever?

Discussion Guide cont.

Suffering leads to character and perspective changes for Christians.

- In what ways have you been changed due to difficult circumstances or situations?
- How can we learn from Christ's experiences of suffering?
- What kind of trials are you currently facing?
- How are you reacting to these trials?
- Does your attitude in times of suffering honor God?
- How can you help others who are suffering?

Peter says that believers should be able to give an account for the hope that they have.

- What hope is Peter referring to?
- How does this hope noticeable to others?
- How does this hope change anything in the mind of a believer?

In order for someone to notice the hope that you have in Christ that determines your attitude and mindset in times of trouble, people must first notice that you are in a time of trouble. This kind of transparency can be difficult to allow because of pride.

- Why is it important that people know more about you than just the good things?
- Why do you think it is important for others to know we are not perfect?
- How would you personally share your testimony in a way that displays your hope and reliance on Christ?

Gospel Connection:

Suffering is a part of life. Even for the one who never sinned, there was still great suffering. Trials happen to everyone. How we deal with trials shows a lot about the condition of our heart. If suffering knocks you down to a place of hopelessness, there is a lack of trust in God's sovereignty. Hope in Christ means that we trust in his ability to save us from our sins. It means that we rely on his redemption in our lives. It means we are looking forward to the day that our faith becomes sight and we experience God's creation without the mess of sin distorting it. It means eagerly awaiting the redemption of all things and the joy that comes when all suffering for those who are in Christ is finished forever. Jesus is the Creator and Redeemer of the world. He will one day bring everything back into order and under his original design. One day there will finally be justice and believers will experience the overwhelming joy of knowing Christ forever that supersedes the temporary suffering of this life.

Discussion Guide cont.

Practical Implications:

- Think:** How do you react to trials in your life? Do you pray for God to remove you from the trial or do you ask Him to grow and shape you through the tough times? Think about how God can continue to shape you more into the image of Christ and how He will accomplish that.
- Pray:** Ask God to give you the right perspective of life. Ask Him to help you experience the peace that comes from being in relationship with Him.
- Do:** Be ready to share your testimony with others. Open up and be transparent about what God is doing in your life.

How to Handle an Atheist

Christianity 101, Part 3

1 Peter 3:13-17

- How do you handle an atheist?
- How do you respond to cynicism and unbelief?
- How do you live in a culture that denies and defies the God of the Bible?
- How do you begin to make disciples in a world that denies the supernatural and the miraculous, along with a Creator God?
- How do you respond as a student to an Oxford university professor who admitted that he would die a happy man if he could make just one person disbelieve in God?ⁱ
- How do you handle an angry, antagonistic world?
- How do you make a dent in their willful blindness to the reality of a Creator?

A world represented well by one Harvard University professor who admitted his own bias toward materialism – that is an evolutionary world view that denies the supernatural work of a Creator God – he wrote rather famously now – and I quote – “We take the side of science in spite of the absurdity of some of its constructs, in spite of its failure to fulfill many of its promises [regarding] life, because we have a prior commitment to materialism. And materialism is absolute for we cannot allow a divine foot in the door.”ⁱⁱ

In other words, whatever you do, don't give God an inch in the conversation; don't even begin to open the door to the possibility of a Creator God. Materialism – the universe – nature – must be the answer.

In spite of the fact (Frank Turek writes in his excellent apologetics book, *Stealing from God*) that materialism doesn't have an answer for the fine tuning of the universe – and earth – so perfect to sustain life; materialism doesn't have an answer for the laws of nature or the laws of logic or even the laws of mathematics – all pointing to a designer – including all the information embedded in the genetic code along with the complexity of the human mind along with a universally held standard of morality – that some things are evil and some things are good – and everybody knows it. Where did that standard come from?ⁱⁱⁱ

And maybe you're thinking, that's why we need people like Frank Turek and others who are skilled in rhetoric and philosophy and worldviews – these brilliant apologists who answer the skeptics.

That's their role in life and we're so glad to have them around to defend the gospel.

What's interesting is to discover that in the mind of the Lord through inspired scripture, the average ordinary believer is the apologist – every one of us are to give an answer – not necessarily about mathematics or genetics, but about something else.

If you take your New Testament back to our study in *First Peter chapter 3*, the Apostle Peter is delivering *the* key text supporting the discipline of apologetics.^{iv}

It's found in the middle part of *verse 15*; ***always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you . . .***

And right about now, most of us are thinking, “Oh no, I’ll never be a great apologist or anywhere close!” That’s not the point.

When you look at the context of what Peter is writing, while you can certainly sharpen your skills in answering the atheists and agnostics and evolutionists and materialists along with all the world’s religionists – which is why we have an apologetics conference here at Colonial every year, to sharpen our skills – but when you look at the context here in this paragraph, Peter is about to inform the Christian that *his attitudes* are as critical as *his answers*.

In other words, your *attitude* about life is as much a part of apologetics as your *answers* about life.

And what Peter unfolds for us here is the best way to live in a world where we are surrounded by unbelievers – in fact, your life sets the stage by provoking curiosity and interest.

In fact, the atheist and the materialist and the religionist will see *your* life as the unanswerable evidence – they just cannot figure you out! What kind of person are you? What makes you tick?

Let’s work through these next few verses and pull from them 4 ways to make a difference in a world of unbelief.

1. First, consider suffering to be a blessing!

1 Peter 3:13. Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?

Stop for a moment – Peter is asking something of a rhetorical question.

Who is going to want to hurt you when you’re eager and *zealous* to do good things? And Peter’s question expects the response – nobody will want to harm people like you!^v Then Peter says, using the 4th class condition, there more than likely will be people who will want to harm you.

The verb here translated *harm* appears in other passages to refer to mistreatment (*Acts*

12:1); vicious hatred (*Acts 14:2*); active persecution (*Acts 18:10*).

Verse 14 – Peter adds, you’re *suffering for the sake of righteousness*.

In other words, you’re in trouble, not because you caused trouble, but because you stayed away from trouble. You are *suffering for the sake of righteousness*.

The word for *suffer* here appears 12 times in 1 Peter; more than in any other New Testament book – 41 times in the New Testament this word refers to experiencing something unpleasant or hurtful.^{vi}

So Peter underscores the fact that goodness is not a guarantee against suffering.^{vii}

But even though you aren’t treated good, you’re going to still do good and live good. Even though the world is unkind, you’re kind. Even though you get hurt, you don’t hurt anybody back. And the world said, “Who are you?!”

Now notice the believer’s attitude – ***verse 14 again – But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed.***

Really? I don’t feel blessed. I feel hurt, demoted, ignored, maligned, stepped on, mocked.

The Lord used this same word for blessed in His sermon on the hillside: ***Matthew 5:10. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”***

The word translated *persecuted* has the idea of being chased or pursued. You could render it “harassed”!

By the way, make sure you are being harassed for doing the right thing. When you get pulled over for running a stop sign, you aren’t being harassed by the State Police who chased you down.

What Peter alludes to and what the Lord preached is also a key part of the Apostle James' letter where he writes, "***Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance***" . . . spiritual maturity or completion. (***James 1:2-4***).

Even the Lord Jesus, as fully human and fully God, developed His perfectly obedient character, the writer of Hebrews says, ***through the things He suffered (Hebrews 5:8)***.

You're blessed – why?

Two reasons:

- a. First, because suffering fashions you after the character of Christ.

If Jesus learned as a young man through suffering, so will you. One author put it this way: "human adversities are God's universities."^{viii}

Suffering is a classroom where faith and character are taught best.

- b. Secondly, suffering not only fashions us into the character of Christ, suffering focuses us on the coming of Christ.

Jesus preached this truth – Peter reinforced it as did the other Apostles – you're blessed because you're going to leave this anti-Christ world and one day live in the glorious kingdom of our Lord where, the prophet writes, the knowledge of the Lord's glory will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea (***Habakkuk 2:14***).

In other words, suffering focuses you back on the coming of Christ. And when you're suffering – whatever it might be – disease, persecution, loneliness, loss, or whatever else – it has a way of loosening your grip on things; on stuff; on earth.

Over the years of ministry here – and this past Family Conference was no exception – so many of our speakers who are used so

significantly for the Lord's work, suffer in so many ways, and most often they do so silently.

One of our speaker's oldest sons was murdered a few years ago; another speaker lost a child to cancer; another speaker was struggling with kidney damage that created tremendous fatigue; another speaker leaned over to me as I asked him about his health and he said, "I'm grateful for optical advances so that what happened to my grandfather isn't happening to me – because when I go to bed tonight and take out the powerful contact in my right eye, I will be completely blind."

Christians who are significantly used by God are Christians who significantly suffer.^{ix}

So here's how to become an effective apologist in an atheistic world: consider suffering to be a blessing from God.

2. Secondly, March to the beat of a Divine Drummer!

The last part of ***verse 14. Do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled.*** In other words, the world around you is going to try and intimidate you and coerce you to fall in line with the majority. Don't back down or back up.

On this 500th year anniversary of the courage of Martin Luther and the reformation *solas* we recently focused on, Luther refused to back down, even in the face of incredible intimidation and, frankly, centuries of church tradition. He said, as he stood there in the court of Worms, "Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God."

And from the reformation came these *solas* – these "onlys" – like *sola scriptura* – the scriptures alone; *sola gratia* – salvation is by grace alone; *sola fide* – justification is by faith alone; *solus Christus* – we are saved by Christ alone.

The word *alone* is what created all the heartburn; the world says,

- let it be the scriptures plus other sacred writings;
- let it be grace plus merit;

- let it be Christ plus the church;
- let it be faith plus works.

Come on, don't be so dogmatic . . . don't be so committed to *one Lord and one faith (Ephesians 4:5)*.

Christian, don't be intimidated. And don't erase the hard truths from the gospel.

Peter goes on in *verse 15, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.*

Sanctify Christ – which means, to treat as holy. Make Christ holy; regard Christ as the Holy One. In other words, treat Christ with absolute reverence and set Him above all other allegiances.^x

Peter actually combines a text from *Isaiah 8:13* with this statement here to make a stunning reference to the deity of Christ.

Isaiah writes, *It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy.* The Hebrew name for Lord, Isaiah writes, is Yahweh, or Jehovah.

In other words, Peter is taking this phrase from Isaiah and applying it to the Jesus – *sanctify Christ as Lord* – as Jehovah.

Imagine: Peter is essentially informing the church that the Jehovah of the Old Testament is Jesus Christ of the New Testament.

And in this analogy, because Christ is God the Son in flesh and blood, He then obviously deserves to be the Divine Drummer and we march to the beat of His divine will.

But notice that the marching doesn't begin with your feet, but in your heart – notice again, *Sanctify Christ as Lord in your heart.*

Make Him sovereign Lord in your heart where only you dialogue with Him; where only you can see and know who sits upon the throne of your heart and mind and life.

Peter clearly says to sanctify Christ as Lord *in your heart.* Why the heart?

The heart in Peter's day was considered, or spoken of, as the place of deep emotion – that's where fear would live, that's where love lived; that's where disappointment lived.

In fact, to this day we talk about being:

- disheartened
- downhearted
- fainthearted

We talk about heartaches and, for someone who is experiencing greatest despair or loss, we still refer to them as being brokenhearted.

It's as if Peter is reminding us that it is at that place of deepest emotion and deepest longing, the place where these early believers and every believer to this day:

- feels the abandonment;
- feels the loss;
- feels the mockery;
- feels the suffering;
- feels the anguish;

there – in that secret sanctuary – in there, crown Him Lord.

The hymn writer put it 150 years ago:

In your heart enthrone Him,
There let Him subdue
All that is not holy,
All that is not true.^{xi}

Samuel Wilberforce was the third born son of William Wilberforce. You may remember William Wilberforce as the committed believer who invested his life in the late 1700's to using his political office to end slavery in Great Britain.

His son, Samuel, was also a committed believer who once wrote that Christ as Lord in your heart can be defined in four words:

Admit
Submit
Commit
Transmit.

Admit our sin and the need of Christ as Savior, *Submit* to Him as we forsake sin, *Commit* our way to the Lord day by day, And *Transmit* to others the truth of His gospel.

Admit
Submit

Commit and Transmit

Sounds like these four action points – which leads me to the matter of transmitting –

- **Not only do you consider suffering to be a blessing;**
- **Not only do you march to the beat of a Divine Drummer;**

3. Third, Remember, you have the final answer!

Verse 15 again – always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you.

Listen, when you consider suffering to be a blessing and you march to the minority beating of your Divine Drummer, people are going to ask you about it.

The word for *ask* – *everyone who asks you* – is an informal term used by Peter – rather than some kind of formal inquiry.^{xii}

In other words, Peter would be describing a normal conversation. It might be at work, over the back yard fence, at the water cooler in the hallway or in the classroom after the bell rings.

They want you to give an account – an *apologia*, in the original language – which gives us our word, apologetics.

It's translated here as “an account” or “a defense”. *Apologia* gives us the English word apologetics or apology. Apologetics doesn't mean that we're really good at apologizing. The word means to defend or to answer.

In other words, Peter writes, the world is going to want an answer – but would you note something surprising: they want an account not for the faith you believe, but for *the hope* you have. They can't get past that!

The first century was no different than the 21st century. Every age is an age of frustration and uncertainty and heartache and loss. What is with those Christians who view suffering as a blessing and march to no one's beat but their Lord and seem to have hope that transcends this life. I have to find out! I have got to ask them!

And here's the implication of this text; it doesn't matter if

- you can't fire off three responses to the theory of evolution
- or expound on the cosmological argument for the existence of God
- or explain where Cain got his wife and how the snails reached the ark before it started raining.^{xiii}

In the end, people want to know about your hope! How is it that you handle suffering the way you do and why have you surrendered your life over to Jesus Christ? They want to know about that!

Now be careful. That doesn't mean you live a perfect life and that you never mess up.

Just remember who is writing here to be a ready defender of the hope they have in Christ. Who was it? Peter, the disciple who ran from the courtyard rather than answer questions from unbelievers about what he knew about Jesus.

You don't need a perfect record; you just need to tell them that your hope is in a perfect Savior.

So when someone asks you how you are handling that difficult situation, you don't need to think, “I'd better put on a happy smile and say, ‘I'm just fine.’ ”

That unbeliever might need to hear the whole story! Give them the whole story.

Just recently I came across a rather humorous account on why you need to tell the whole story. One day an old man was casually walking along a country lane with his dog and his mule. Suddenly a speeding pick-up truck careened around the corner, knocking the man, his mule, and his dog into the ditch.

Later on, after the old man recovered from his broken arm and leg, he decided to sue the driver of the truck, to recoup his medical costs. While the old man was on the stand, the counsel for the defense cross-examined him: “Now I want you to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the following question: Did you or did you not say

at the time of the accident to the driver of the vehicle that you were ‘perfectly fine’?”

The old man responded, “Well, me and my dog and my mule were walking along the road” – and the attorney interrupted him, “Sir, I asked you to tell me ‘yes’ or ‘no’ – did you say to the driver that you were ‘perfectly fine’ at the time of the accident?”

“Well, me and my dog and my mule were walking . . .” and the attorney appealed to the judge, “Your Honor,” he said, “This man is refusing to answer the question. Would you please insist that he answer only the specific question at hand?”

The judge said, “Well, he obviously wants to tell us something; so let him speak.”

The old man said, “Well, me and my dog and my mule were walking along the road and this truck came around the corner far too fast, knocked us into the ditch and broke my arm and my leg. The driver stopped, got out of his truck, saw my dog was badly injured, went back to his truck, got his rifle, and shot it. Then he saw that my mule had broken his leg so he shot it. Then he said to me, “And how are you?” and I said, “I am perfectly fine.”^{xiv}

Listen, when you are asked to give an answer, don’t reduce it to a sound bite – “I’m perfectly fine.” That might sound good or perhaps more spiritual, but tell more of your story.

Unbelievers need to know that you are suffering too. In fact, you are suffering some of the same things they suffer, but you consider it the work of God in your life which leads to deeper and richer blessing. In fact, Peter adds to this idea, down in *verse 17* – ***For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.***

In other words, it is only going to happen if God should will it so – and you are going to anchor your heart to Him.

Yes, you’re suffering, but you’re trusting in His sovereignty. Yes we sorrow too, but not like those who are without hope (*1 Thess. 4:13*).

And the world just can’t quite figure out your hope!

And so they ask about your hope, and Peter adds here that when you give them your answer, and you tell them the whole story, make sure you answer them – notice at the end of *verse 15* – ***with gentleness and reverence*** or respectfulness.

In other words, avoid any kind of arrogance or rudeness. Don’t come across like you’re superior or smarter than they are.

Warren Wiersbe writes on this text, we are not trying to win arguments, but lost souls to Christ.^{xv}

That’s a good reminder as you develop your skills and knowledge of scripture and of the world around you which God amazingly created. Not one materialist or agnostic or atheist has ever been debated into the kingdom of God.

That unbeliever you work with isn’t thinking over dinner, “Man, that guy beats me every time we get into an argument about life and theology. He always has the best answer. I guess I’m going to have to get saved.”

God has called us to be witnesses, not prosecuting attorneys, as it relates to answering the unbeliever.

Finally, number four:

4. Don’t ignore your conscience!

- Consider suffering to be a blessing;
- March to the beat of a Divine Drummer;
- Remember, you have the final answer!

And now – don’t ignore your conscience.

Notice verse 16. And 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.

You may not be able to avoid being slandered, just try not to provide them with ammunition.

Keep a good conscience. A conscience, one author wrote, can be compared to a window that lets in the light of God's truth.^{xvi}

So keep the window clean with regular confession and cleansing.

Again, Peter refers here to that part of you which is hidden – which no one can see.

No one but you knows what your conscience is saying.

- Peter has referred to mentally considering suffering a blessing;
- Emotionally not panicking in the face of trouble;
- Privately keeping Christ exalted in your heart;
- And now internally keeping a clean conscience.

Interesting, isn't it? When it comes to the matter of good apologetics, who you are in private seems to matter more than what you say in public. So keep a good conscience, Peter says, which, notice further, ends up reflecting good behavior.

And even the world knows what bad, sinful, evil behavior is – just read the newspapers today. And the world knows what good, clean behavior is too.

Peter seems to be delivering a warning – if you're going to tell people that Jesus Christ is the answer, make sure your life doesn't raise questions. That's the worst kind of apologetics.

According to the Apostle Peter, your life is to be exhibit A to the grace and power and forgiveness and hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ.^{xvii}

You, beloved – your life, your attitudes, your hope and trust – *you* happen to be the unanswerable argument for the truth of

Christianity – *you* bring yourself to the world of atheists and materialists and religionists.

- Your heartache – but hope in Christ;
- your problems – but peace with Christ;
- your suffering – but surrender to the purposes of Christ;
- your failures – but forgiveness received from Christ;
- your redeemed life is the irrefutable evidence to the reality of the gospel of Christ.

So here's how to handle an atheist – this is the best kind of apologetics: show and tell your world of atheists and materialists and religionists about your own life; the whole story whenever you can.

Like the hymn writer a century ago who wrote out his testimony this way:

My hope is in the Lord who gave Himself for
me
And paid the price for all my sin on Calvary.
No merit of my own, His anger to suppress,
My only hope if found in Jesus' righteousness.
And now for me He stands before the Father's
throne;
He shows His wounded hands and names me as
His own;
His grace has planned it all – 'Tis mine but to
believe,
And recognize His work of love, and Christ
receive.
For me He died; for me He lives,
And everlasting life and light He freely
gives.^{xviii}

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- ii Frank Turek, Stealing from God (NavPress, 2014), p. 153
- iii Adapted from Turek, p. xxiv
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- v Adapted from D. Edmond Hiebert, 1 Peter (BMH Books, 1984), p. 221
- vi Hiebert, p. 223
- vii Adapted from John MacArthur, 1 Peter (Moody Publishers, 2004), p. 197
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- xiv Charles Price, *from the sermon, In the Beginning: The Creator at Work, People's Church Toronto*
- xv Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Hopeful: 1 Peter (David C Cook, 1982), p. 97
- xvi Wiersbe, p. 97
- xvii Adapted from Hiebert, p. 227
- xviii Norman J. Clayton – My Hope is in the Lord, 1945