

~ 1 Peter ~

Week One

April 25, 2021, The Rev. Dr. Sam Ferguson

**Sermon Notes**

—An opening illustration—

Imagine an overwhelmed son or daughter calling their parents. They're overwhelmed by the challenges of raising kids, sustaining a marriage, doing a good job at work, and addressing health concerns. They're ready to give up. So, the parent decides to write a letter in response. But what should they say?

First, life is hard. It's not a vacation but more like an arduous path. You must face its challenges without abdicating responsibilities. Stand firm, keep walking.

Second, life's hardness does not mean that it's not good, or that you've done something wrong. In fact, it might mean that you're right where God would have you. Pressure and pain forge character, so keep lifting your eyes up to the Lord. Embrace the narrow, righteous path. Stand firm, keep walking.

—Background to 1 Peter—

1 Peter is the first of two letters Peter wrote to churches in modern day Turkey at the time of Emperor Nero. At this point, the Church was small, but also growing and gaining attention. Throughout the Empire, Christians faced marginalization and violence. This danger from without was worsened by a danger within—that the church, in the face of such pressure, would lose its resolve.

In this letter, Peter reminds Christians that following Christ is a different, costly kind of life. His letter aims to firm up the churches and refocus them on the bigger picture of life with Christ. This life

is hard (just look at the life of Jesus), but there is great hope and purpose in it.

**1 Pet. 4:12.** 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.

**1 Pet. 5:12.** By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. **Stand firm in it.**

These hardships that Peter addresses are not pointless. They bear refinement, which in turn prepares Christians for a glorious future.

**1 Pet. 1:6-7.** In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Peter is writing to weary and fearful Christians, and he's honest about the difficulties of life. But he exhorts them to remember the hope and joy that comes from looking to Christ.

—1 Peter and our post-Christian society—

1 Peter is probably the most poignant passage in the Bible about Christians living in a non-Christian society.

Today, while there still may be a lingering religious atmosphere in America, we've moved into a post-Christian society. The cultural gatekeepers are secularists. We're not really a pluralistic society where people from many faiths feel comfortable and accepted, and society increasingly ridicules Christians.

However, we must first confess that for all the soft persecutions we may experience, we (Christians in America) have not stewarded our perch of religious majority perfectly. We have been lured into various forms of consumerism—self-help triumphalism, preaching the American Dream more than the crucified Nazarene. As Bonhoeffer put it, we are users of “cheap grace,” weak and worldly, and we can only lament these shortcomings.

Now, this is not meant to be a blanket critique. It’s an attempt to be alert to the danger of suffering for the wrong reasons.

**1 Pet. 3:17.** For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

If Christians are more and more marginalized, let us be sure we’re suffering because of our love for God, not of power or money.

The situation of Peter’s recipients is not so different from ours today. They endured social rejection, loss of opportunities, and imprisonment. Peter’s letter provides a roadmap for what it means to stand firm and engage (i.e., thrive) in a moment like this.

—Relevant for vision of engagement—

How should Christians relate to the society around them? There are at least two pitfalls this letter helps us avoid:

(1) **Withdraw.** Retreating from society simply doesn’t square with Peter’s words.

**v. 2:12.** Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

**v. 2:9.** But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the

excellences of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

v. 2:17. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

v. 3:9. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.

(2) **Assimilation.** Peter rejects Christians being swallowed up by the world around them.

v. 1:14. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance...

v. 4:2. so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.

—A holy fool—

What is holiness? It is to be set apart *from* and to be set apart *for*.

**1 Pet. 1:14-16.** As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

In ancient Russian and Greek literature, there is an important role called the “holy fool.” This character is someone who treasures Christ so much they no longer fit in with the world; they’re considered naïve and a simple by others.

There is a helpful example of a holy fool in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The book is about the dysfunction of a father and

his three sons. The youngest son, Alyosha, is the novel's holy fool. Though in seminary to become a monk, Alyosha is sent out into the world by his spiritual mentor. Alyosha's holiness is seen through the loving openness and humble generosity he shows to all. He seeks not to take but to bless.

In one scene, Alyosha goes to the house of a character named Grushenka, who lives to torment men with her affections. Yet Alyosha treats her lovingly and innocently as a sister, not an object. Grushenka eventually collapses before Alyosha in shame and joy. His pure and humble life challenged her sin. He communicated a love she had never known.

It was holiness. And it was more than what Alyosha said or did. It was who he is.

Holiness is the totality of a person. It convicts but does not condemn. It's the character of God through people, and the world finds it strange and alluring. Our engagement with the world must take the form of holy presence.

—Four prayers for this series—

That God will...

- (1) rightly shape our expectations through Scripture.

America teaches us to avoid hardship and expect some kind of heaven here on earth. But Peter speaks of waiting and refining. We should not be surprised by fiery trials. We should not be tricked into thinking the present is our permanent home. We're travelers on an arduous journey.

- (2) strengthen our resolve and prepare our minds for action.

God help us to set our hope fully on grace. He can make us a people with a backbone. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, who models what it looks like to have unflinching resolve for God. Let us be a gentle, loving, and *tough* church.

- (3) posture us as a holy presence toward the world.

We will need great character and wisdom for this. How should we engage different issues like justice, sexuality, technology, or politics? May God foster in us a posture of holiness in everything we do and talk about.

- (4) reinforce our need of each other.

**1 Pet. 2:5.** ...you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For Peter's listeners, this would have brought to mind walking into a great temple with perfectly shaped stones fitted together. This journey is not meant to be taken alone. Only together will we thrive.

The vision of life that comes out of 1 Peter (suffering, waiting, etc.) is what people want implicitly. People don't want an easy life, they want a meaningful one with responsibility and dignity.

### Discussion Questions

Was there something in this sermon that particularly stood out to you?

Is there a brother or sister in Christ in whom you've seen the truths of 1 Peter bear out? Someone who has maintained right expectations about life (i.e., it's an arduous journey) and has maintained resolve and holiness through Christ? What is it like to be with this person?

Bonhoeffer writes that true grace is costly: "Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life." What might

following Jesus look like in the week ahead? How might it be costly? Where in it will you find grace?

Consider that God is in the business of ever-refining you for a future glory. Reflect on this. How ought this truth change the way you approach the troubles of a given day?

Consider the pitfalls in engaging society: withdrawal and assimilation. How do these bear out in your own life? Maybe commit to memory 1 Pet. 1:14-16 this week.

Think about the “holy fool” character, such as Alyosha. The world considers a holy fool to be naïve, silly, and odd. It’s an aspect of holiness to not quite fit in with the world. Is this difficult in our culture? What might seeking holiness cost you?

Would you consider praying the four prayers for this series every week? Ask God to do these things in our body of believers.

### **When Time Allows**

[Here you can find](#) Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it he cuts to the quick by shining light on “cheap grace” and its prevalence in the church. Consider reading the first chapter this week on cheap and costly grace.

[Here is a good translation](#) of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. You can find the scene described in this sermon in Part III, book seven, chapter three. In the provided translation, this chapter is called, “An Onion.”

[Here is a helpful](#) video by The Bible Project on the word “holiness.” [Here’s another helpful video](#) that provides an overview of 1 Peter.