

Stand Out

1 Peter 4:1-8 (NIV)

¹ Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. ² As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. ³ For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. ⁴ They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. ⁵ But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶ For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit. ⁷ The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. ⁸ Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

Individuality vs. conformity. I feel like that's a title to some sophomore philosophy class paper, but let's consider this topic for a moment. What's better: to make it your goal to stand out as much as possible as an individual or to conform to societal norms and standard practices? I'm guessing you already know that there is not one blanket answer to a question like that. When getting asked, "What do you think?" that's a great and encouraged time to make your individual voice heard because that is what is being asked for. When standing in the check-out line, though, instead of butting ahead of others because you're an individual who doesn't like to wait in lines, everyone would really appreciate it if you conformed and queued up and waited for your turn like everyone else.

A place to start answering such a question would be by examining your motives or reasons for emphasizing your individuality vs choosing conformity. Are you emphasizing your individuality for selfish reasons, to further your own agenda, to benefit yourself? Are you choosing to conform because you were taught not to question authority or think for yourself or even because you don't know any other way? Christians have wrestled with these ideas for millennia, including those to whom Peter wrote in our Bible reading this morning. Should they stand out from the crowd, from the world and society that they live in? Or should they conform and go with the flow, especially to avoid hostilities and keep the peace among their neighbors?

Peter starts chapter 4 of his letter by giving guidance on this issue. "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God." (verses 1-2)

Arm yourself with Christ's attitude. What is Christ's attitude and how does that help me in this topic of individuality vs. conformity? To arm yourself with the same attitude of Christ is conformity, conformity to Christ specifically. But this kind of conformity will actually make you stand out in the world. Christ's attitude goes against the typically socially acceptable behavior of the world. The world says, "Someone hurts you; you hurt him back. Someone insults you; you insult them back. Get even. Repay evil with evil."

Christ did not do this. He repaid evil with blessing. As the Pharisees plotted Jesus' demise and openly challenged him, he tried to gather them to himself like a mother hen gathers her chicks. When his hometown crowd tried to shove him off a cliff, Jesus walked away instead of using his almighty power to make the earth swallow his enemies. When they arrested him unjustly to put him to death, he did not call down his angels to slaughter them. Instead he endured. As they hurled vile insults at him on the cross, Jesus did not spit on and curse them but asked God the Father to forgive them. Even while suffering, Jesus did not repay evil with evil, but instead continued to conform to God's will and his Word, enduring that suffering so that all people would be saved.

Peter tells the Christians that he was writing to and to us to adopt Christ's attitude knowing that conformity to Jesus' attitude will cost us. It will make you change your life. You will no longer do some of the things that you used to do, some of the things you may still do. Being a follower of Christ means conforming your will to God's, to live as God says to live.

Peter tells his original audience, "For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry." (verse 3) We might look at that list and think, "These are some particularly bad sins. These are crude. I don't do these things. A majority of the people living around me don't do these things. I don't get drunk. I don't participate in debauchery or orgies. That's unthinkable. I don't do those wild parties (any more). These are crude, blue collar type sins. I worship the true God. I must be doing a good job of arming myself with Christ's attitude, of conforming to God's will."

Do you, though? Have you conformed to God's will for your life? Have you armed yourself with Christ's attitude of repaying evil with blessing, an attitude of willingly suffering for the sake of doing good to the glory of God? Maybe you don't do these base, blue-collar type sins mentioned here. Maybe your sins are more white-collar, good looking sins that are more socially acceptable, things that everybody does.

When someone upsets you, do you wish good things for them? When you see someone else commit a sin, doing these things that the pagans choose to do, do you puff your chest out a little bit more because at least you're not like those guys? When you see someone succeed when you don't think they deserve it, do you express your thoughts about how you think they pulled strings or cheated to get there? When you encounter friends or family complaining about other people, do you join right in with their complaints, adding to the insults being hurled at this person's reputation? Do you think that you are arming myself with Christ's attitude by only committing white collar sins like these, not those blue collar despicable sins like living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, and detestable idolatry? Committing white collar sins is not arming yourself with Christ's attitude. It's actually conforming with the world's attitude. And, yes, even these white-collar sins are just as dirty and rotten and damnable in God's eyes as those base blue collar sins.

This is where our conformity with God's will, arming ourselves with Christ's attitude, will make us stand out. When you reflect on Christ's attitude to repay evil with blessing, it will change how you live. You will chastise yourself for wishing evil upon someone, wishing them to get knocked down a peg or two to satisfy your personal vendetta against them. When you see others sin, you won't elevate yourself but rather humbly reflect on your life and the sins you have committed and look to God for the forgiveness he won for you. Instead of creating or joining in a verbal assault on someone, you will look for how you can defend them and take their words and actions in the kindest possible way.

Conforming to these Christ-like attitudes will make you stand out, as Peter wrote, "They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you." (verse 4) They will be surprised when you don't join in with these things, when you humbly confess your short-comings instead of boasting of how you are not like these others, when you stick up for people that no one else sticks up for. And what will you get for standing out by arming yourself with Christ's attitude and conforming to God's will for your life? Weird looks. Abuse. Insults. Murmurs behind your back. People who were once your friends turning against you.

You don't arm yourself with Christ's attitude to be liked or to get a pat on the back or so that you can puff out your chest when you see other people fall short of his standard. No, you want people to see that you are different, to stand out in such a way that makes them ask, "Why do you do this? Why do you always defend that guy, that mess-up? Why don't you ever give an air of superiority? Why don't you ever try to get even from time to time, to treat people how they treat you?"

You want people asking you why you stand out because you want to share with them what Jesus Christ has done for you. You want to share with them his attitude and how his attitude led to him always treating people the right way, not repaying evil with evil, but repaying evil with blessing. You want to show them that Jesus' attitude led him to sacrifice himself for people who insulted him, who rejected him, who hated him, who wanted his death. His attitude is a self-sacrificing, non-stop self-less love that none of us can perfectly imitate. We want to show his attitude because it was his loving attitude throughout his whole life that covered over all the times I have repaid evil with evil, every time that I have spouted an insult back against someone who hurt me, every time I murmured about someone behind their back because I hated to see things go well for them or because I wanted to feel superior to them. God's love for me that Christ lived through his attitude covers over my multitude of sins.

Because Christ with his attitude covers over my multitude of sins, I arm myself with that same attitude so that others can have his loving attitude and actions cover over their multitude of sins and change them. Christ's attitude for me changes me. He suffered once for sins, the righteous one for the unrighteous ones [for you and me], to bring [us] to God. (1 Peter 3:18) This makes me want to conform to his will, to arm myself with his attitude, and stand out from the crowd by not conforming to the standards of society, but instead by conforming to God's will.

O loving Jesus Christ, our Savior, you have covered over my multitude of sins. Arm me with your attitude so that I stand out for your glory by living according to you will and no longer by choosing the sins of my past. Amen.