

A Christian's Reality Check

Christianity 101, Part 6

1 Peter 4:4-6

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

Christians sometimes need to be reminded of how and why people might react to their belief in the gospel. Jesus represents justice and righteousness and people who associate themselves with him represent the same things. Because of that, Peter reminds his readers that unbelievers will not like being reminded of their sinfulness and impending doom due to it. Christians should not be surprised that unbelievers do not understand them. Christians should not be caught off guard by the unbelieving world's resentment. The gospel moves on, and even though the life change it brings can shock people, Christians are reminded to stand firm because of the upcoming judgment on the world and the glory of Christ.

Discussion Points:

All people are born in sin. We all have selfish desires and are slaves to those desires. That is the reality of the sinful nature. Everyone is aware of this depravity even though some choose to deny or repress this knowledge. When a person is changed by the gospel, everything about that person starts to change. That change can be dramatic.

- What kind of life change did you experience when you accepted Jesus as your lord and savior?
- Do you think others around you noticed the difference?
- Did anyone ever ask you about what changed in your life?
- Have you ever seen someone else's life change as a result of the gospel?

Peter makes sure that his audience knows this reaction from unbelievers is natural.

- How do unbelievers react to someone who has become a Christian? Why?
- What does persecution look like right now in America?
- What does persecution look like in other parts of the world?
- How would Peter tell us to react to the persecution?

Discussion Guide cont.

One day, the world will be judged and Peter reminds his audience of this fact after explaining the reaction of unbelievers to Christians.

- Why do you think these two statements are tied together?
- How does judgment relate to Christians being maligned?
- How does this reminder affect Peter's Christian audience?

In verse 6, Peter underlines the purpose of the gospel that he has been preaching so fervently for so many years.

- What does he say the purpose of the gospel is?
- What is the significance of the difference between flesh and spirit here?
- What is the relationship for a Christian to the flesh?
- Does the flesh influence a Christian after he has come to Christ?

Gospel Connection:

This first letter from Peter has a main theme about Christian suffering. Peter knows that his audience is being mistreated solely because of their beliefs in Jesus. He wants to remind them of the true gospel so that their trials do not shake their faith. To do this, he uses the example of Jesus over and over again. Jesus was perfect. Jesus was holy. Jesus was God. If anyone should ever deserve comfort, peace, or rest, it was him. For our sake, however, Jesus set that aside and took suffering he did not deserve. He was reviled unjustly. He was insulted and spat upon. He was even killed because of who he was and what he represented. Sin is blinding to us as people. Jesus did not have this blinding influence, though, and knew the suffering was worth it. Peter reminds us in this passage that we can't afford to be shortsighted. We know the truth and we cling to it. Jesus died for our sins because of his love for us and not because of anything we did. He suffered the ultimate price for us so that we might live. To follow after Christ requires following after his sufferings and share in them. The world does not like to be reminded of its condition, but as Christians, we represent a holy God who will one day bring everything back into order and justice. This suffering right now is momentary and it perils in comparison to the greatness of reconciliation and life with God into eternity.

Discussion Guide cont.

Practical Implications:

- Think:** How has the gospel impacted your life? Have you experienced any kind of pushback from the world due to your faith? How can you endure slander from unbelievers with joy?
- Pray:** Thank God for who He is. Ask Him to give you the strength and comfort for when you are maligned for your faith. Ask Him to build within you steadfastness and patience so that you do not lash out when you are attacked.
- Do:** Encourage other Christians who are enduring trials of their own. Build them up to help them through difficult times. Also, pray for those experiencing persecution around the world and look into ways that you can encourage and help them too.

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1 Peter 4:4-6

I came across an article that showed how Hollywood distorts reality: It read – If you watch carefully:

- you'll notice that every grocery shopping bag will contain at least one stick of French bread.
- you'll notice how the ventilation system of any building is strong enough to hold one or more people who are crawling through it
- you'll notice that a man will show no pain while taking the most ferocious beating but then will wince when a woman tries to clean his wounds
- you'll notice that cars that crash always burst into flames
- you'll notice that no one suffering a severe beating will suffer from a concussion
- you'll notice that when anyone is involved and heavily outnumbered in a martial arts fight, the attackers will patiently wait to attack one at a time
- you'll notice that any lock can be easily picked by a credit card or a paper clip in seconds—unless it's the door to a burning building with someone trapped inside
- you'll notice that a woman will always go down into the basement or walk out into the woods alone at night after hearing a noise
- you'll notice that the lead actors and actresses in a Victorian movie never sweat, even though they are wearing layers of clothing – and they all have white, perfectly straight teeth.

Obviously, you're watching a distortion of reality.

Two commercials aired several years ago playing up on how reality isn't necessarily what things look to be. Both commercials carried the message that things aren't what they look like, so don't jump to conclusions. They aired during the Super Bowl.

In one of them, a convenience store shopper is standing at the counter, talking on his cell phone. He then blurts out to the person on the other end, "You're getting robbed!" The two clerks hear him say those words and immediately react by squirting him with pepper spray, and zapping him with a stun gun. They obviously jumped to the wrong conclusion.

In the second commercial, a man is preparing a romantic dinner for his wife and himself. He is shown chopping vegetables with a large knife while tomato sauce is simmering in a pot on the stove. Their white cat jumps up on the counter, knocks the pan of sauce onto the floor and then slips off the counter and falls into the puddle of tomato sauce.

Just as the man picks up the cat, his wife opens the door and sees him holding in one hand, the cat dripping with red sauce, and in the other, a large knife. And you know what she thinks, right? "My husband has come to his senses!" I mean, "killed the cat."

What you think and even see at the time, might not be reality!

One of the challenges in life, frankly, is having a realistic view and a true perception of whatever it is that confronts you.

That's why premarital counseling is so helpful; it removes some misconceptions and prepares you for reality.

That's why you take Driver's Ed too, right? You're not going to know what it's like until you actually get out on the road.

One of the challenges of Christianity is that the perception of what it's going to be like to be a Christian is often very different from reality.

The New Testament letters are filled with what we could call, "reality checks" for the Christian.

This is what Lord Jesus essentially said to his disciples: "Look the world is going to hate you because it hates me – so get ready for that."

As Peter concludes his series of applications, which we have entitled *Christianity 101*, he delivers to the Christian what we could easily call a "reality check."

Here is what is more than likely going to be the reality of your experience as you live boldly for Christ and serve as His ambassador in the world: the unbeliever isn't going to respond like you think they will or should and they are going to jump to the wrong conclusions.

So as we work through these next few verses, let me outline them in the form of four reality checks for the believer –

1. Reality check #1: don't be shocked by the unbeliever's surprise (v. 4a)

Let's back up to *1 Peter chapter 4 and verse 3*, and get a running start. *For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles* (the unbelievers), *having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries* – we covered this in our last study – now, *verse 4. In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation . . .*

Did you catch that? They are surprised that you do not run with them anymore.

The word translated *surprised* can be rendered "astonished!"ⁱ What are you doing? What's come over you? What are you thinking? The truth is – you're finally thinking!

Have you ever thought about the fact that the world never seems to be astonished when:

- someone wrecks their life;
- someone ruins their body or destroys their home;

- or when someone runs from one sin to another.

But let somebody get sober or clean, let somebody start living morally pure and honest or spiritually-focused and they're going to think you've lost your mind.ⁱⁱ

They're surprised that you don't want to run with them anymore. The word Peter uses for *running with them* pictures a mob of people madly racing in a stampede of pleasure seekers.ⁱⁱⁱ

The phrase could also be rendered, *plunging into with them*; in other words, Peter is drawing a word picture of people without God plunging into – diving into – all kinds of human desires and passions, desperately trying to find something that satisfies. And they're shocked that you've gotten out of the water, that you've left the stampede.

Here's the reality check: you are going to be viewed as strange because you refuse to run with the herd.

The world is astonished that:

- that you people go to church and waste hours of your day off when other people go fishing, play sports, mow the grass or catch up on all the sleep they lost during the week;
- that you people donate your time and you actually give away as much of your money as you can when other people – obviously in their right minds – keep all the money they can for themselves;
- that you people get demoted or mistreated and pray about how to respond when other people have already called three lawyers.^{iv}

What's wrong with you?

Notice again – and here's the real issue: *they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation*. The word for *excess* pictures a rushing torrent of water which is overflowing; think Niagara Falls rushing over the edge. It is beautiful and mesmerizing on the one hand and fatally dangerous on the other.

A raging flood of *dissipation* – dissipation refers to a state in which a person’s mind is so corrupt that he thinks about nothing but sin and how he might indulge again and again.^v And the world is surprised that you don’t want that old life anymore.

They are surprised that you’ve left that old life and that old crowd and you have a new, rather strange, crowd and a new, rather strange, life.

Here’s the reality check: they think you’ve lost your grip.

- When Jesus revealed His messianic mission, his extended family got together and decided to take him away, assuming, Mark writes, that He had lost his mind (*Mark 3:21*).
- When a political leader was witnessed to by the Apostle Paul, he responded by saying, “Paul, you’re mad; you’re insane (*Acts 26:22*).

Here’s the reality check: Don’t be shocked at the world’s surprise.

2. Reality check #2: Don’t be disheartened by the unbeliever’s heartlessness

Here’s the potential in the life of every Christian: the world might not stop at surprise; notice *verse 4*, the latter part, *and they malign you*.

Listen, here’s the reality check: your testimony as a committed believer doesn’t just surprise the world, it collides with the world.

The gospel is a confrontation with sin, which means the gospel is going to be a confrontation with sinners – remember, it confronted *you*! And when your new life confronts your old life, your old friends can end up becoming your new enemies.

The word Peter uses here for *malign* is a word that means to heap abuse – from the word *blasphemeo* – which gives us our word blaspheme.

When this word is used of people blaspheming people, it means to injure the reputation of – to defame – to revile.^{vi}

These are serious responses to your change in lifestyle.

Let’s face it: it’s one thing for the world to be surprised; it’s another thing for you to be slandered.

Peter has already referred in this letter to unbelievers accusing you of doing wrong (*2:12*); of speaking maliciously about you (*3:16*); and now here again he uses another word that unmasks the hostility of the world against the Christian.

Listen, here’s the reality check: your refusal to participate in or approve of their sinful lifestyle becomes to them an indictment and they might end up hating you for it. Your refusal to run with them actually provokes resentment in them.

Here’s the progression of an unbelieving world moving from surprise to slander – in our day and age, here’s what it sounds like:

- You’re not going to go out with us anymore? Aw, c’mon, loosen up and live a little!
- What do you mean you think it’s wrong?
- So that means you think *we’re* wrong?
- So you think you’re better than we are?
- Who made *you* the judge?
- Just who do you think you are!
- You’re ruining our happiness with your pious judgmentalism!
- You are a danger to our way of life!

Why are people so profoundly irritated with someone who has a genuine case of Christianity?

Here’s why: genuine Christianity becomes a testimony in the world through your life; and you become a standard of godly right and ungodly wrong which every human being knows is right or wrong. They actually have that standard written on their heart.

Paul writes that *the law of God is written on every person’s heart (Romans 2:15)*; which means that *your* testimony reminds *them* of

something they know to be true.^{vii} And they don't appreciate being reminded.

Your very presence provokes that unspoken reminder, and with it then, you provoke hatred and resentment.

Sometimes they keep it to themselves and sometimes they let you in on it. I had a woman last week give me a note after the service. It had been mailed to her and to her husband by anonymous neighbors. They live in a nice neighborhood filled with nice people. This couple is in their early 70's.

They didn't mean any harm, but for several years they have included gospel tracts in what they put into children's trick or treat baskets when they come to their home. The note read – and I've edited some colorful parts for a reason, by the way – “The word is out that you put fear-mongering filth in my child's Halloween bag. You are a pig . . . how dare you . . . you should know the neighborhood has its eyes on you – we hear this has gone on for years – no longer! No longer!”

Somebody is upset. I thought it was tragically interesting that the gospel to them was “fear-mongering filth”. And now this couple is warned that they are being watched because of the danger they evidently represent. What a heartless response – all they did was deliver the gospel.

Sometimes, you don't even need to say anything when people know what you represent as a Christian.

In his book entitled, *The Holiness of God*, R. C. Sproul tells the story of a time when Billy Graham was invited to play golf with President Gerald Ford and two PGA tour professionals.

Sproul writes: After the round of golf was finished, one of the other pros came up to the golfer and asked, “Hey, what was it like playing with the President and Billy Graham?” The pro unleashed a torrent of cursing, and in a disgusted manner said, “I don't need Billy Graham stuffing religion down my throat.” With that he turned on his heels and stormed off.

His friend followed him but said nothing. He sat on the bench while the pro hit some practice

shots. After a few minutes, the pro settled down and his friend said, “So, Billy was a little rough on you out there?” The pro sighed and admitted, “No, he didn't even mention religion . . . I just had a bad round.”

Imagine, Sproul applied, the unbeliever was provoked to anger – and he blamed the round he was having on what he knew Graham simply represented.^{viii}

Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer once wrote – and here's the reality check that Christians can often overlook – “The unbeliever [sometimes] trembles at the rustling of a leaf; he [often] feels the hound of heaven breathing down his neck; he feels crowded by holiness . . . in the presence even of an imperfect Christian.”^{ix}

Peter is giving us a reality check – people can become heartless toward you simply because of *what* you represent. But don't become disheartened; be prepared for it. Don't expect applause; expect anger.

Don't lose heart at the world's heartlessness; take a realistic view of what you represent – a gospel of life *and* death; a gospel of forgiveness *and* judgment!

As A.W. Tozer used to say, the gospel is not a suggestion, it is an ultimatum.

Take a reality check on *Who* you represent: a Savior who became so hated and so envied and so misrepresented and so maligned that He eventually had spikes driven through His hands and feet and hung on a cross to die.

In the early days of the first century, the leaders of Christianity were imprisoned; some were executed, just as Jesus had promised – ***If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you (John 15:18).***

As then as the early decades rolled on, Christians were all eventually viewed as a threat and a danger to the unity of and the good of society; they were even considered haters-of-life.^x

Imagine how upside-down that accusation was. Christians are now the haters.

Eventually, around A.D. 50, the Roman emperor Claudius expelled all the Christians from Rome. They weren't allowed government

posts; he wanted them out of the upper echelons of political power and land ownership in the capital city. Only 16 years later, Christians were being put to death in Rome by an Emperor named Nero.^{xi}

One watchdog ministry that tracks persecution around the world has written perceptively on this progression of persecution. They have recorded that Christians are liable to persecution now in more than 100 countries.

And the progression, or digression, of persecution follows down this path:

- Surprise
- Ridicule
- Pressure to conform
- Educational sanctions
- Economic restrictions
- Loss of employment
- Loss of property
- Physical mistreatment
- Harassment by officials
- Imprisonment
- Forced labor
- Torture
- Execution^{xii}

Here's a reality check for true Christianity: Don't be shocked by the unbeliever's surprise. Don't be disheartened by the unbeliever's heartlessness.

3. Reality check #3: Don't be callous about the unbeliever's coming day in court

Verse 5. But they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

The judge isn't mentioned here by name, but other passages such as ***Acts 17:31*** where Peter preached that the resurrected Lord would serve as the final judge.

God the Father has granted to God the Son, our Lord Jesus, the role of Judge in the final judgment of the unbelieving world. In fact, that is considered one of the crowning features of

Christ's vindication and exaltation (***1 Peter 3:22***).

Any thought by the believer that we really don't care about the unbelieving world slandering us and mocking us because they're going to get it in the end – that doesn't fit with the reality and horror we know of the unbeliever's future.

Peter reminds them and us here in this verse that Jesus isn't just going to be the final judge; notice – *He is ready*.

In the original construction – Peter paints this rather awesome picture that Jesus is in *continued readiness* to exercise eternal judgment.

This is at the heart of disbelief and defiance against God – if He's really alive and if Jesus is really God incarnate, then we're in major trouble.

We are accountable – and when you're accountable, you will – Peter writes here – ***give an account***.

Peter uses the language of a courtroom setting.

Have you ever been in a courtroom? Don't raise your hand – see me afterward.

Whether you're there to serve on the jury, or to pay your speeding ticket or for more serious matters, the courtroom just breathes a solemn, fearful, quiet ambience.

When the judge enters the courtroom, the command is given, "All rise for the honorable" . . . and the name of the judge is given as the judge mounts the stairs and sits behind the bench. He looks down on everything as an implicit reminder that he is the final authority.

One day the command will be given to all of the unbelieving world – both those who are living and those who are dead – those whose bodies inhabit a grave. The command, "All rise" will be heard throughout the universe and all of the unbelieving world will rise to stand before that Great Throne, described for us by the Apostle John.

And everyone will give an account.

I recently watched a woman being asked to give an account for the death of an elderly man, confined to his bed in a rehabilitation center. Several times he called for help, pushed the call button, but this nurse didn't arrive.

He then apparently died. And when the nurse came, she looked down at him, but never took his vitals. Another nurse came in and they laughed about something, she bent down to turn on an oxygen tank, but it didn't work and she didn't try to fix it or replace it.

She was asked about the event and she began to talk about how she performed CPR and other life-saving measures. She denied that he had called for help. She denied that she had failed to take his vital signs. She denied that she waited nearly an hour before calling for an ambulance. She denied laughing and joking with another nurse.

She evidently had no idea that a camera was installed in the hallway, just outside this patient's door and everything had been recorded. And when the prosecutor turned the video tape on, she sat there dumbfounded in silence. Caught.

Think about the Divine Judge for a moment – He needs no eyewitnesses to the deeds of the unbelieving world because He is **omnipresent** and He was there to see everything they did; He doesn't need cross examination because He is **omniscient**; He not only saw what they did, He knew what the motive in their heart was for doing it.

When you think about what the world is saying about you, it's as if Peter is reminding us, don't become callous and uncaring; just think of what it will be like to be judged by the One who is in the state of readiness to judge them.

Yes, they're saying terrible things about you, but just remember, *Jesus will have the last word.*

Yes, they may have made your life miserable and they may even take your life, but just think of their unending sentence of misery and their eternal life. They will have their day in court and it will be too late.

Peter doesn't end his comments on the unbeliever's future, Peter turns the corner and gives one more reality check on the believer's future.

No matter what your past has been like, no matter how difficult your present life is, no matter how discouraging, painful, fearful at times, difficult; no matter how the world treats you, you have to keep in mind how heaven will one day welcome you. So,

4. Reality check #4: Don't be forgetful of your glorious future

*Verse 6. For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead – Peter says, **the gospel has been** – in the past – **preached to those who are now dead.** You could translate this – *the gospel has been preached during their lifetime.**

Dead people aren't being preached to and there isn't a second chance for salvation after death. Those are errant interpretations of this text.

What's happening here is that Peter is answering the question in the early church – and in every age, frankly – about what happens to believers when they die.

The implication is that unbelievers were mocking and maligning the Christians because they were dying just like everybody else.

In other words, Christians were claiming to have been given new life – eternal life, for that matter – but it didn't seem to gain them any advantage because they died like everybody else.^{xiii}

Some believe that Peter is referring to martyrs being **judged in the flesh** unjustly and put to death – either way, Peter wants to answer the basic question – what happened to the believers who had already died.

Here's a great clue: Peter makes the same contrast here between flesh and spirit that he did with the Lord, back in **chapter 3:18 – that Jesus was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.**

In other words, Peter is informing the Christians that their future is the same as their Lord's future. Even though their bodies die, their spirits live on, just like Jesus did. And one day, your spirit – which goes to be with the Lord immediately after death – will be reunited with your resurrected, glorified, immortalized body to live forever with Him.

How do we know that's true? Because, Peter concludes in *verse 6* – this happens to be *according to the will of God*.

Alright, let me tie up the loose ends here and put three final lessons on the board as we wrap up Christianity 101.

a. First, when your testimony becomes obvious, don't anticipate support – anticipate slander

This is a reality check! If you get a promotion because of your walk with Christ, that's wonderful, but it's the exception.

The prophet Daniel received a promotion in his government post and it became the doorway that led straight to the lion's den.

There's that old saying that goes, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." That just isn't true. Slander stings and words wound. Expect to be bruised and even battered, but then go often to be bandaged by the ministry of the Spirit and the healing water of the word.

Regardless of surprise or slander, stay the course.

b. Secondly, when responding to slander, don't express anger – express compassion

Here's the reality check: it's not our right to demand relief, answers, respect, fair treatment or rewards for doing what is right.

Remember, this is the time the world can have their say about you, and they will have their say.

But Peter is implicitly reminding us that no matter what the world says, just remember, God will have the last word.

And because of that we pray for, we pity, and we plead with our world to be reconciled to God.

c. Third lesson: when trusting Christ now, when life isn't so glorious – remember your future.

D. L. Moody, the great evangelist of the 19th century, was often heard to say, "One of these days you will read in the newspaper that D. L. Moody is dead. Don't believe a word of it! I will be more alive than I am now."^{xiv}

And that future perspective gave him greater trust and more joyful obedience to Christ during his lifetime.

That was the testimony of William Featherstone, a contemporary of Moody, who came to faith in Christ and stopped running with his old crowd; he was willing to take a stand and declare his allegiance.

He put his testimony into a simple poem when he was 16 years old – it goes like this:

My Jesus I love Thee, I know Thou art mine,
For Thee all the follies of sin I resign.
My gracious Redeemer, my Savior art Thou,
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus 'tis now.

And what about his future? He writes;

In mansions of glory and endless delight
I ever adore Thee in Heaven so bright;
I'll sing with the glittering crown on my brow,
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus 'tis now.^{xv}

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/19/2017 by Stephen Davey.

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- i John MacArthur, 1 Peter (Moody Publishers, 2004), p. 229
- ii Adapted from Warren Wiersbe, Be Hopeful: 1 Peter (David C Cook, 1982), p. 118
- iii MacArthur, p. 229
- iv Adapted applications from Life Application Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Peter/Jude (Tyndale, 1995), p. 111
- v Adapted from MacArthur, p. 229
- vi D. Edmond Hiebert, 1 Peter (BMH, 1984), p. 263
- vii Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, Insights on James, 1 & 2 Peter (Zondervan, 2010), p. 213
- viii Quoted in David R. Helm, 1-2 Peter and Jude (Crossway, 2008), p. 133
- ix Adapted from Helm, p. 133
- x David R. Helm, 1-2 Peter and Jude (Crossway, 2008), p. 133
- xi Daniel M. Doriani, 1 Peter (P&R Publishing, 2014), p. 162
- xii Citation: <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2000/september/12605.html>
- xiii Adapted from Hiebert, p. 257
- xiv John Phillips, Exploring the Epistles of Peter (Kregel, 2005), p. 169
- xv Robert J. Morgan, Then Sings My Soul (Thomas Nelson, 2003), p. 150