

Repay evil with blessing

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[0 : 00] This morning's reading is from 1 Peter chapter 3 from verse 8 to verse 22. 1 Peter chapter 3 reading from verse 8 to the end of the chapter.

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult.

On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech.

They must turn from evil and do good. They must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats, do not be frightened.

[1 : 09] But in your hearts, revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

He was put to death in the body, but made alive in the spirit. After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits, to those who were disobedient long ago, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, while the ark was being built.

In it, only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water. And this water symbolises baptism that now saves you also. Not the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God.

It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand, with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him. So, if you've got a Bible with you, do you have 1 Peter chapter 3 open in front of you.

[2 : 35] We're going to be looking at the first five verses of what Esther read for us there, verses 8 through 12. I wonder if you had the opportunity to live in whatever kind of family you might choose, what would that family look like?

Bizarrely, I did sort of have the opportunity to do that once, because preparing for my GCSE French oral exams, I knew there were going to be all those questions about family and pets and so on coming up.

And I knew that if I had to give the names and ages of seven different children, then I'd be there all day and we'd never do anything else, and I'd doubtless make a whole bunch of mistakes along the way. So I invented a new family.

Nice and tidy, one brother, one sister, job done. You want a pet? Well, je un hamster. Why complicate things? But what's perhaps more interesting than thinking about the members of your ideal family is thinking about how that family relate to one another.

What would ideal family relationships look like? In an ideal world, how would siblings treat one another, do you think? How would children relate to their parents?

[3 : 45] How would husbands and wives relate to one another? What would be your recipe for harmonious family life? Now, Peter's considered some of the elements of that in the preceding verses that we've looked at the last couple of weeks, and how those particular relationships might operate.

And you can go back and listen to those recordings if you weren't around. Peter now kind of broadens his scope out from those specific individual relationships to a more general case. And he turns a little bit away from how households relate to one another and turns towards how church members relate to one another. But there's an invitation here in what Peter writes to take the idea of an ideal family and apply that to the church.

See, where we have here in this first verse, in verse 8 of chapter 3, where we have love one another. The particular kind of love that Peter talks about here, the word he uses, it refers to brotherly love.

Love each other as brothers and sisters. That's what Peter's calling us to do in the church. There is a particular pain when sibling relationships break down, isn't there?

[5 : 01] Most of us with brothers and sisters will have had seasons shorter or longer where things have not been good between us. And it's painful when it doesn't work.

It's painful because the closeness that was once there, or at least the closeness that something within us says should be there, is absent.

And Peter takes this idea and he applies it to the church. He says that kind of closeness that exists in an ideal scenario between brothers and sisters, that kind of closeness should be a mark of the church, should exist within the fellowship of believers.

That is the kind of love that should be displayed. And so verse 8 focuses on these family relationships within the church. We'll give that the heading, Harmonious Living. And then the rest of the section that we're looking at, verses 9 through 12, that's kind of more outward looking.

How does the family relate to others? And that gets the heading, Repay Evil with Blessing.

Harmonious Living, Repay Evil with Blessing. So verse 8, finally, all of you, be like-minded.

[6 : 14] Be sympathetic. Love one another. Be compassionate and humble. The finally here, start of verse 8, this is kind of finally within the section that began at chapter 2, verse 11.

Not finally within the letter as a whole. There is still a good bit to go. But Peter's now kind of closing out this section of his thinking. So this is all part of thinking through how to live as foreigners and exiles.

Abstaining from sinful desires. Living lives that invite others to glorify God. That's the kind of the big heading of chapter 2, verse 11. And it runs down to this section we're thinking about here.

And we've had these more specific bits directed to slaves and wives and husbands. And now this is explicitly all of you. All of you be like-minded and so on.

So like-minded. Have unity of mind. Live in harmony. However you want to express it. This is actually a really significant command. Maybe it's easy to glide over.

[7 : 15] But this isn't a small thing. Like-mindedness with other believers means we share a common aim. We have a common purpose. One goal defines our life together.

And whilst like-mindedness was prized by Peter's contemporaries, the society into which he wrote, a Christian like-mindedness doesn't have as its first objective cohesion within a society.

In fact, actually, Christian like-mindedness is probably going to reduce cohesion with society as a whole. Because it cements us together as a counter-cultural group of elect exiles, as Peter has called those to whom he writes.

We are increasingly at odds with our society as we are melded together with this like-minded purpose as we seek a common goal.

It's fundamental, isn't it, for a team to work together. A sports team, if they're going to succeed, they have to have that shared goal of winning the game. They have to be striving towards that one objective.

[8 : 23] If some of the players are more focused on their own personal glory than on the success of the team as a whole, then the effectiveness is reduced. Any team needs that kind of clarity of purpose to succeed.

It's true at work as much as on the sports pitch. If one half of the team has their priority of getting it done as fast as possible at all costs, and the other team is focused on kind of sweating every little detail, polishing it until it's as perfect as it can possibly be, no matter how long it takes, well, you have fundamentally different objectives and priorities.

And unless you can channel those two ideas together as one, striving towards a common goal, then the whole thing will crash and burn and the team will fail. You need like-mindedness if you are to achieve as a team, and that is true of us as a church.

So significant is the task set before Christ's church that we can't afford to be at odds with one another. Like-mindedness is vital to our success.

That means if we, as Christians, if we're more focused on making ourselves look good than focused on the goal that we supposedly share, then we will not succeed.

[9 : 39] A group of singers might have different roles within that group, but if they don't work together to produce a harmonious sound, we just end up with a mess, don't you? Like-mindedness is our goal.

Now, there are limits to that, in that it matters what that common goal is. If we have different objectives, well, we can't say that we are like-minded.

If we have different approaches, then we're not like-minded, and it matters. I don't just come and follow your goal over there just because then we can be heading in the same direction, because it's not better for us both to be heading in the wrong direction.

Scott McKnight says, truth is not sacrificed on the altar of harmony. We cannot sacrifice truth. There is one objective.

Truth is not sacrificed on the altar of harmony, but personal feelings belong on that altar. In other words, I am not at liberty to prize like-mindedness over the truth of the gospel.

[10 : 42] I can't share a common goal with Jehovah's Witnesses. There are fundamental disagreements between us about what the gospel is, about who God is, about the world that he has made.

We have fundamental differences. We have different goals. We can't be like-minded. There are people with whom we cannot share a common goal. But I'm also not at liberty to prize my feelings, to prize my opinions over unity and harmony.

We are called to like-mindedness. We might well have preferences about all kinds of different things. We can have opinions about what coffee is served after the service.

We can have opinions about which songs we can sing. We can have opinions about what time we meet and where we meet and how long we spend on different things within our services and so on and so on. We can have opinions about these things.

We can have discussions about these things. but there does come a point where we have to subordinate our desires to a greater purpose doesn't there where we say well this isn't my preference but we're going to strive for it with all our might anyway we let go of our preferences for the sake of seeking our common goal that's why for instance as a matter of policy when one of the church's official decision making bodies comes to a decision then the members of that body are expected to support that decision in public regardless of their personal preferences they might have voted against this decision within the group that made it but once the decision is made there is an expectation that we have this commonality of purpose that we strive towards what we have agreed unless you've formally dissented from a decision which is a really serious thing to do then you speak well of the result it's not always easy to do it isn't easy to you know find good things to say about something you're not convinced is a good idea it isn't always easy but it's a matter of expressing our unity in Christ Jesus expressing our common purpose that's true of the curcession here at covenant and the deacon's court and for that matter it's true of the presbytery and the general assembly as well the the higher decision making bodies of our denomination we seek unity and there's an extent to which that ought to be true of all of us as a congregation together not just these kind of official decision making bodies now folks don't mishear me okay because when you say you know once the decision's made you have to support it there's a danger that saying that well that can be a route towards bullying people can't it to saying you know my way goes and you just need to get in line that's not my intention of what we're saying here okay but we do have to work out well what does it look like to actually strive towards this common goal to have this common purpose and there may be things where you know it still needs to be challenged and there might even be times where that has to be done in public but long before that stage well it should be the case that we're we're talking to one another we're having those discussions internally we're finding our common purpose together and then striving towards it and so you know we as elders here at covenant church we want to hear different perspectives and opinions you might remember a couple of years back we did that congregational survey to work out you know what are we doing well what do we need to be doing better at and we were kind of just starting to pick some of it up and the pandemic hit and so on and we're we're kind of getting back to working through some of that together as a group again now but we hear these perspectives and opinions in those slightly more

formal ways like a survey but also in the ordinary conversations that we have one and with one another we hear different perspectives and opinions precisely because we value unity because we want to be working together as a team and not you know ruling by theats we want to hear these perspectives but there does still come that point where we're like-mindedness and harmony where this call to unity means that we get on and we push ahead together even if it's not quite where we'd have chosen to go ourselves it's a tricky line to walk isn't it you know to balance up these different conflicting things but my instinct is that that in our highly individualistic society that we are more likely to be divisive when we should be showing unity than river than the reverse and so this call to be like-minded is an important one for us to hear from peter second he says be sympathetic [15 : 34] again it doesn't sound like that dramatic of a word does it you know be sympathetic but it's probably a bit stronger than you think sympathy we think you know a listening ear a quick there there and move on with your life that's about our usual level of sympathy with people right the greek word that peter uses here it's a compound of two parts okay two words put together like you know cooperate two words put together the words that peter puts together are together and suffer suffer together be sympathetic sun together patho i suffer suffer together peter's saying something here about being fellow sufferers mourn with those who mourn see peter's writing to a group of people who are suffering who are facing persecution their lives are difficult and he says be sympathetic nobody's hearing that and thinking well i should write a card saying sorry you got persecuted no somebody in your church loses their job because of their faith you rally around and you find them a new job and you keep the family afloat in the meantime someone's being insulted for their faith you go and you stand alongside them the same is true today isn't it sympathy means if you're in the fortunate position that there are other believers at work or in the club or whatever whatever situation you're in if you're not the only believer there then sympathy means if the other christian in that environment is being mocked well you stand up to be counted you stand alongside not just you know sometime after they've been mocked you go and say to them sorry you had to go through that i'll pray for you no you stand up to be counted james writes suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food if one of you says to them go in peace keep warm and well fed but there's nothing about their physical needs what good is it what good is it to say there there i'll pray for you after the fact sympathy does something about it sympathy suffers alongside one another third love one another love as brothers and sisters now we know all too well the possibility that brothers and sisters sometimes don't love one another but we understand the idea we get the principle here right that there's this sense of commitment to one another through thick and thin that's how we know families should be there's a degree of closeness above the sibling relationship sorry about the sibling relationship above most other relationships there is a closeness to that and you know the bible uses a variety of different metaphors to talk about what the church ought to be like how we should relate to one another but i think for me i find the ways that it talks about church as family i find some of those the most attractive and compelling to me because it's talking explicitly about how people relate to one another i mean think about it families who live far apart from one another in different parts of the country they'll move mountains to be together for special occasions won't they think about the drama when so-and-so doesn't come to the wedding or think about the distress last christmas when our plans were changed at the last minute and suddenly it all fell apart because of the closeness that's there but i think even even more uh in line with what peter's really imagining here is a sort of everyday closeness of family not the family that lives the opposite ends

of the country but the family that live next door the family that live down the road for families who live in the same house or nearby well we expect that the family relationship there is going to involve a lot of everyday ordinary helping one another out and getting things done you just pitch in and get on with it we expect that that happens in this kind of normal fashion without drama without fuss families don't tend to invite one another around for grand dinner parties you just get on with it not the dinner party just the ordinary family meal come and help out come and cook the pasta while i'm trying to take one bunch of children over there and the other bunch of children over there and you can stay and watch this child while i families get on and get stuff done you pitch in and peter says that's the kind of love that we ought to have for one another the kind of love that pitches in and get stuff done the kind of love that's expressed in the ordinary and the everyday as well as sometimes the big dramatic gesture it's both isn't it it's the depth of love that does drive the length of the country to see somebody and it's the ordinary love that means that we rely on one another that means that we invite one another into the mess we confide in one another we say yes this this

house is imperfect but come and join me here yes this isn't going to be the grand dinner party of my dreams but come and eat with us love one another fourth compassion peter calls the church to compassion for one another and your model here is jesus himself and jesus teaching the gospel tells jesus had compassion on the crowds he had compassion for the sick he talks about the compassion of the father in the parable of the prodigal son he commends the compassion of the good samaritan who cared for the injured man compassion isn't just kind of abstract empathy compassion isn't distant well wishes compassion isn't just throwing money at a situation though that might be a start sometimes no compassion draws near compassion gets stuck in might do as good to consider where here at covenant church never mind further afield where our compassion is needed fifth and final within verse eight a call to humility i mean this very much fits in with what we've considered the past few weeks doesn't it this call to subordinate our will to those in authority over us in whatever sphere and especially it fits with the call to imitate christ a call to humility peter writes to a very class conscious world where everyone knows exactly where they stand in the pecking order in any given situation and to that peter calls for humility where what he's commended has in places parallel to the values of the day you know we've thought about things where he's commending something that others also commend sometimes for different reasons but you know the same objective well here he's commending something that is completely the reverse of the priorities of the culture around him a culture where where humility is equated with weakness and shame the value that peter that christianity as a whole places on humility it's remarkable in that context to say it's good to be humble and i think it's still true today maybe we can't you know pinpoint our social status in quite the same way but we don't on the whole prize humility do we you know dragon's den and the apprentice they teach us you have to believe in yourself if you're going to get anywhere in life you have to think i am the greatest

i can do whatever i set my mind to if you want to get anywhere at all that's what these programs that's what our schools tell us believe in yourself i can do anything i'm the greatest and the idea of admitting uncertainty or suggesting that somebody else might actually know better in a particular situation well that's a sign of weakness to be exploited and not a commendable character trait yet peter commends humility it'd be good to think wouldn't it about what what life would look like for us as well my notes say as a fellowship but for us as a family it'd be good for us to look think about what life would look like for us as a family if we considered the needs of others before our own if we were to let go of our preferences in favor of others what would that look like so verse 8 peter commends these these attitudes they're going to make for harmonious living within the community of believers and he continues now in verses 9 through 12 with a challenge to look outside a challenge that can best be summed up as repay evil with blessing see this call to brotherly love that's kind of internally focused it doesn't really make sense for peter to tell them to treat others as brothers it's only fellow believers that would be described in such terms but we're now shifting to this relationship with the outside world remember the chapter 2 the second half talked about kind of relationships with the formal structures of the world outside the church that command to submit to civil authorities so that was kind of the the formal structures if you like and now we're focused less on those official relationships and more on our interactions with friends and colleagues and neighbours peter says do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult but instead we ask what does it look like to repay evil with blessing well step one of that is it's a refusal to retaliate isn't it a decision not to seek vengeance a choice not to punish others for their wrongdoing we're plenty familiar aren't we with historical and literary examples of grudges passed down through the generations of family feuds that go on for hundreds of years when evil is repaid with evil that repayment is always perceived by the first offender to be disproportionate at the initial offence and he's then offended in turn and he retaliates and so on and so on and so on and the whole thing snowballs see this call not to repay evil with evil it's a call to break that cycle isn't it to break the chain of the blood feud it's a call to forgive now maybe that idea of an intergenerational tit for tat maybe that is thankfully remote to our experience

I hope that's not something that many of us are ensnared within so let's bring it let's bring it down to a smaller scale shall we a little bit more local a little bit more individual a little bit shorter term about this scenario somebody you live with calls you out why are you why are you being this way why are you angry unpleasant grumpy why are you in a bad mood right now how do you respond when somebody says that maybe we say to ourselves or we say aloud we say well i'm grumpy and i'm angry with you because you were grumpy with me i felt offended by your behaviour and so i respond this way in turn i repay evil for evil and it can be incredibly small scale can't it but that same

cycle of tit for tat of evil for evil it can develop can't it in our marriages in our friendships between brothers and sisters the smallest offence produces a response that leads to resentment that's then repaid that snowballs into and before you know it you are you're in this scenario where you're flying off the handle for the tiniest thing because it's not actually about the tiniest thing anymore it's about all the other things that you've been storing up all of those past debts all of the evil that you've been repaying for evil down through the days months years well either of you can break the cycle this snowball effect of endless vengeance it can't develop if either party refuses to continue and chooses instead to repay evil with blessing maybe there's a culture at work of endlessly sniping at one another trying to get ahead by putting others down well refuse to play that game talk up your colleagues accomplishments they want to bring up something that you've done wrong respond by pointing out something they did well repay evil with blessing can be quite small scale but even in these small things it might well not be easy can be small scale and it might be more dramatic too because Peter doesn't say repay inconvenience with blessing he says repay evil with blessing and so this also applies when somebody does something to you that is so horrific that it's rightly described as evil when somebody deliberately attacks you for your faith when somebody consciously tries to pick a fight with you

Peter says repay evil with blessing it doesn't necessarily mean you do nothing at all Peter said a few verses earlier one of the responsibilities of government is to punish evil so saying don't repay evil with evil doesn't necessarily mean that evil has to be ignored it might be appropriate to inform the relevant authorities of particular wrongdoing even if you're the only injured party it might be appropriate for the protection of others lest these same patterns of behavior be applied in other situations it might be appropriate because sometimes loving a wicked person sometimes it does mean acting to bring an end to their wickedness so that they won't multiply their guilt or for a number of other reasons but the response to which we're called is one of active blessing isn't it Peter doesn't say repay evil with a kind of quiet huff this isn't a passive aggressive response is it may repay evil with blessing because to this you were called that you might inherit a blessing it's in this willingness to repay evil with blessing that you show your heart has been transformed by the love of

[30 : 57] God it's the spirit at work within you that enables you to respond in this kind of way and guarantees your inheritance repay evil with blessing why well verses 10 through 12 simply because this is the kind of behavior that God expects Peter quotes Psalm 34 to show that this is not a new idea that he's bringing in that this is what God has always wanted from his people always expected you want to see good days you must keep your tongue from evil not you must keep your tongue from evil unless someone else started it no no keep your tongue from evil you must seek peace and pursue it actively enthusiastically pursue peace not meander towards it not hope you find peace somewhere along the way pursue it verse 12 then offers what you might call a foundation for our ethics behave this way because God is watching the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer

God sees when you are wronged you don't need to seek vengeance yourself because God already knows what has happened his eyes are on the righteous and that doesn't just mean he's aware of what happens I mean he's aware of everything that's happening everywhere now just as when we looked at Psalm 95 on Thursday we thought about how here kind of inherently implies obey well here see implies protection God sees the righteous the righteous implies he protects the righteous you don't need to strike out to protect yourself you don't need to repay evil with evil because the Lord sees now that might not mean that in every scenario he will protect you and preserve you from pain and hurt but it does mean that those things cannot ultimately hurt you it does mean that for those who are under his gaze no power that stands against you will ultimately prevail because you are a citizen of the kingdom of God an exile on this earth there's a warning too though in this closing verse isn't there a warning to all who do evil and those who do evil well that's both kind of the first evil doer and it would be those who don't heed this command and instead repay evil with evil for those who do the first evil or the second evil the face of the Lord is against them that's a reassurance that the Lord will avenge and it's a warning that the Lord will avenge let's pray Lord God our Father we have heard difficult things from you this morning challenging commands that we know we are not equipped to obey that we cannot be perfectly like-minded that so often our humility is lacking that our sympathy is lackluster at best that we so readily instinctively repay evil with evil Lord soften our hearts to hear to obey what you have

commanded soften our hearts and equip us by your
Holy Spirit at work within our hearts giving us giving us the patience the humility the moment to
pause and recognize where we're about to repay evil with evil and the strength to do otherwise to
joyfully bountifully bless others even those who curse us only through your strength can we hope to
do these things so grant it to us this morning we pray amen so go ahead and they're going for