

Harmonious Living

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Date: 03 June 2007

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[0 : 00] Please do keep your Bibles open to that reading from 1 Peter chapter 3. We continue with our series on that marvelous letter. Now, my wife, who is not present this morning, so I can say what I like, is a glass-is-half-empty kind of person, whereas I am a glass-is-half-full kind of person.

We have two contrasting personality styles. And she says this is why we don't ever get anywhere, because all the time she's trying to bring me down to reality, I'm trying to lift her up out of reality. She says that she is a realist and I am not. And I say, well, don't get me started about what I say, but apparently my effervescent optimism drives her up the wall.

And it is true to say that it is hard for me to ever look on the dark side of life. And why should I? I'm a youngest child. She's an eldest child, and that explains everything. I dare say she probably is the realist in the family.

Now, the Apostle Peter, he has a personality style, but he also has a spiritual personality style. And his spiritual personality style is that he is a glass-is-overflowing kind of guy.

[1 : 17] Overflowing. As we have been studying his letter, you might have noticed contrasting themes running through the text. One is the theme of suffering for Christ.

Writing around the year AD 63, Peter will soon lose his life upside down on a Roman cross. The Christians to whom he is writing this letter are terrified because of the suffering that they face because they are Christian.

And Peter does not deny that this is going to happen or that this is part of the Christian experience. Indeed, he prepares them for it. Calls this a fiery ordeal, and yet sees blessing in it.

It's the theme of suffering for Christ. But second, there is such joy and exuberance in this letter. He starts out with praise. He says, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be. Praise because God raised Jesus from the dead. Praise because Christ ascended into heaven and sits now on the throne at the right hand of God with all authority and all power submitting to Him.

[2 : 30] Praise because we who have received mercy at the cross of Jesus share in that same everlasting life. The life which we will know gloriously and completely in heaven.

This is the Apostle Peter speaking who in the first Christian sermon in Acts chapter 2 cried out, God has raised Christ Jesus from the dead and we are witnesses to the fact.

And that is why Peter is a glass is overflowing kind of man. Not an empty optimist refusing to look at reality, but with his eyes fixed firmly on the only truth, the only reality that matters, Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, ascended, glorified.

And that heavenly reality makes the difference to how he tackles the earthly situation in the face of hostility and suffering.

That affects how he deals with events on the ground. Brothers and sisters, that is what we need to bear in mind together as we look at these verses. Because the Christian life needs to be lived out in every situation.

[3 : 47] And the Christian gospel needs to go out into every situation. Even into hostility. Even into opposition.

Even in the midst of persecution. It needs to go out. Christ needs to be lifted up. Because he is the living Lord.

And that changes everything. And that being the case, how do we deal with hostility? How do we live out our lives as Christians? I've got a couple of things I want to point out.

First, verses 8 to 12, the Christian code of conduct. Verses 8 to 12, the Christian code of conduct. So we're looking at just the bottom of page 217 and over.

Now, these verses are part of a larger section in chapter 2 on Christian conduct in a pagan world. And then he moves into teaching about suffering. You may remember he began back in chapter 2 and said, maintain such good conduct among the Gentiles so that in case they speak against you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God.

[4 : 54] You see him picking up that teaching from Matthew chapter 5 we had read out to us. It's about the importance of Christian conduct in every situation, in every relationship, so that the gospel might be proclaimed in our words, as much as in our conduct, and in our very lives.

It's not extraordinary to you that he is saying, look, they will look at you and glorify God. That's the idea. It's amazing. That they should look at our lives and give glory to God for what he has done in Christ Jesus.

And so, in the verses preceding, Peter has addressed various situations, various different relationships, and now he addresses everyone. Verse 8, finally, all of you. And the first thing he does is he gives five virtues for the Christian family to cultivate.

This is for us amongst ourselves. Unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart, and a humble mind. So the Christian code of conduct begins with Christian relationships amongst ourselves, in the church body.

And all of these characteristics are meant to draw us together as a body of disciples. Not a bunch of independent operators, but one family, one body.

[6 : 14] One thinks of Jesus' command to his disciples in John's Gospel to love one another. By this will all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another.

So united around Christ, united around the Gospel of grace, we need to be a family. We need to pull ourselves together as a family. You see, partly because that's our witness to the world.

And because in times of trouble, that is what will be our strength. Because so often, isn't it, in times of crisis and pressure, the human tendency is to fall apart.

So we need to cultivate that unity of spirit gathered around Christ. Gathered around the Gospel. Rather than going our separate ways and cultivating divisiveness, we love one another.

We grow together. You know, one of the ways we cultivate that. There are many ways we do that. It's an attitude. It's a practice. We gather together for services. We live our lives together. But we also pray together.

[7 : 18] And especially when we're facing issues as a congregation, we need to pray together. We need to bring that before the Lord together and seek His guidance. And you find there's opportunities for us to do that on the parish life notes.

We need to pray. We need to be a body at prayer. We need to pull together. But then He turns outward. He begins to address how we deal hostility in others.

And so He says, Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you have been called that you may obtain a blessing.

Now here He's pulling out a very important biblical principle. And in that passage He quotes there, He's quoting from Psalm 34. Psalm 34 contrasts the fear of the Lord with the fear of what others can do to you.

And the psalm assures them and us that God cares for His people. He cares for the righteous. He sees their suffering. He hears their prayers.

[8 : 23] And He sets His face against the wicked. And so the point that they need to get and we need to get is that if we respond to sin with more sin, really we can't expect God to come to our aid.

Really, what is the difference between us or these congregations Peter is writing to and the pagan world all around them? What's the difference? If we respond to hostility with anger, what is that saying about us?

You see, our conduct has spiritual implications. We cannot, as God's people, choose to meet sin with sin.

He says it again a little later on in our passage. Keep a clear conscience. It doesn't help the Gospel in any way if we fall into sin and give the enemies of the Gospel something to accuse us with.

We need to take the high road resolutely. It doesn't mean that we are passive, say nothing or do nothing. But he is teaching them and us the principle that we can trust God in every situation we face and we need to remain righteous in what we do and say because that has an impact spiritually.

[9 : 42] And trusting in God is more than an empty phrase. It is a way of life upon which we need to build our common life together as Christians. And we need to find the confidence in God to respond

to any situation with grace.

And it doesn't mean lying down, taking it. But it means we respond to any situation with grace. God has raised Christ Jesus from the dead.

His power is enough. And that is our code of conduct in a hostile world. Christians need to hang together. And we need to take the high road.

We don't give in to anger. We take the high road. But of course, we go from our code of conduct to the rules of engagement. Verses 13 to 17.

For we do not live unto ourselves, we engage with the world around us. Now for these Christians, that world was deeply hostile and was closing in on them quite quickly.

[10:47] They are facing very imminent threats to their life together, indeed to their very lives. And so we have a rhetorical question there in verse 13. Who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right?

Well, in the big picture, no one. Because God is with you. But on the ground, the Roman authorities for one. And Peter does not shield them from the fact that they are to expect suffering for Christ. For them, that will mean perhaps loss of property, loss of freedom, and loss of life. So they need to know, and we need to know, what are the rules of engagement when we come into conflict because of Christ?

When we meet hostility for the gospel, do we go to war? Do we meet hostility with more hostility?

Do we lie low and just say what we have to say and do what we have to do to save our skins?

How do we engage with a hostile world which hates Christ? Very quickly, he gives us four things.

He says, don't be afraid. Stay close to Jesus. Be ready. Don't sin.

[11:57] See, first of all, it's don't be afraid. Stay close to Jesus. Have no fear of them or be troubled. But in your hearts, reverence Christ as Lord. He's saying, don't be afraid.

They are only human. They are human authorities. And it's true, they can take away your property. They can take away your freedom. And they might take away your life.

But they cannot take away your hope in Christ. And they cannot destroy the gospel. And they cannot destroy the church. So have no fear.

See, I think it's very often fear in all sorts of situations which brings out the ugliness in us. And that's when the tendency to scatter, to fall apart, comes out.

So the way to deal with that in any situation is to stay close to Jesus. Reverence Christ as Lord. Not Caesar as Lord. He's not the authority. Christ as Lord.

[12:58] And the only true place where Christ is worshipped is in human hearts. And there is such certainty to be found in Him. So we have to focus on Him.

And we need, as a congregation, to let our devotion to Christ, let our devotion to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, be the governing principle that guides how we live out our lives in a hostile world. Not fear. Devotion to Christ. But then he goes on and says, be ready. He says, always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you.

Yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Now these congregations, you see what's happening.

They're being called up to the magistrates to explain why they are Christian.

And they are suffering terribly. They are being lied about. They are being labeled in the most destructive way. Early Christians were used as scapegoats. Terrible things were said about them all quite untrue to justify persecution.

[14:03] And so they are being called before the magistrates. And Peter says, be ready. Be ready at all times to give an account for your faith.

In any situation, whether it's a quiet conversation or in the hostile confrontation, be ready. But do so gently and reverently.

Not angrily, not with hostility. Just clearly, appropriately. You see, that is how we engage with a hostile world. We are ready. And we speak not with fear or anger or hostility.

Just clarity and confidence. We are ready. And I guess the question for all of us here is, are you ready? Are we ready?

And so often as Christians, we know what we are against. But can we explain who we are for? And all through this letter, Peter has been encouraging a certain tact in the proclamation of the gospel.

[15:09] Because no one is won by being nagged at. No one is won by anger. But neither are they won when we say nothing. So I would want to challenge all of us here together on this point.

Can you explain the gospel if asked? Simply, gently, so often we want other people to do the evangelism for us.

It's a professional thing, but it's for all of us to do in every situation, in quiet conversations, as much as in the pulpit, where it's appropriate, when it is right.

We are ready. And then he says, don't sin. Keep your consciences clear, he says. And there's that principle again. Take the high road. Christians must remain righteous.

Nothing must be given which can be used against us. Because that doesn't help the gospel. And after all, as he says in verse 17, there's no point suffering for doing wrong. That doesn't help anyone. This is about proclaiming the gospel in any situation, even in the most hostile.

[16:12] We tend to think in terms of reaching the lost, the confused, the misdirected. We have a sympathy for those who are seeking Christ, who need Him. And all of that is right and good and wonderful.

But what about speaking to the angry, the hostile, the enemy, the persecutor, the one seeking to destroy the church? See, Peter sees the cup overflowing.

An opportunity everywhere. The gospel needs to be spoken. And yes, verse 17, we might suffer for the gospel. These people will be hauled up before magistrates.

They will suffer. But brothers and sisters, so do we need to be ready. Because our readiness to explain is the best evangelistic tool there is.

So that's the rules of engagement in a hostile world. Don't be afraid. Stay close to Jesus. Be ready. and don't sin. Which takes me to the end of my sermon.

[17:17] And my last point, the X factor, verses 18 to 22. The X factor. Now this is very important because all of what before would be empty and meaningless if it weren't for the X factor.

And of course, the X factor is Christ. The X factor is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, ascended, and glorified.

And so just in case they or we forget, Peter fixes our attention on the truth of the gospel which we are in. He says, For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit.

See, He holds up before us the one gospel, the one hope for the world. He reminds us that Christ's death was sufficient, that He who was righteous died for sinful humanity and His purpose was to bring salvation, to bring human beings into fellowship with God.

And He holds Christ before us who is sovereign over all creation, who died that all might live, to offer life to all who will choose. It is extravagant, it is overwhelming love, and it is for all.

[18:36] For the world is not divided into the more sinful and less. All fall short, and all may freely choose. Freely.

One gospel, one salvation. And He demonstrates this by pointing back to Noah. Now these are very vexed verses, so we have to pay close attention just briefly here. He goes back to Noah to explain their situation.

And so verse 19, He says, He's talking about, so He says, Death in the flesh, made alive in the Spirit. In the Spirit, verse 19, He, that is Christ, went and preached to the spirits in prison who formerly did not obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah during the building of the ark in which a few, that is eight persons, were saved through water.

Now what He is saying is that the pre-incarnate Christ, in the Spirit, preached through Noah to the people of His time, preached the gospel of grace.

Now the spirits in prison, they are the sinful, disobedient people enslaved to sin. And God, in His righteousness, acted to execute judgment upon them, that's the flood, but also offered mercy, the ark, and waited patiently while the ark was built so that they might choose and repent and know mercy.

[19:59] And right there in the story of Noah is the gospel of grace in embryo. And you see, the point behind it all is that the gospel needs to be proclaimed in every situation, even amongst the very sinful.

It is true, in Peter's day, it is true today that the gospel is preached. And in Noah's time, we see that no one responded. But the message stood.

The offer was there. Same in Peter's day, same today. The cross of Christ stands over us all as the one all-sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world with its message of judgment for sin and its offer of mercy.

And that cross needs to be held up in every situation. And some will respond to the gospel and some will not.

What matters is that Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, ascended, is lifted up high. What matters is that the gospel is proclaimed. What matters is that the offer is made in every situation.

[21 : 13] people will choose. And that's okay. They can choose. Perhaps few will choose.

But the choice is there. The message is there. So as we come to the end, Peter makes his link to his audience and to us through baptism.

He talks about their baptism. That is the symbol of their salvation and ours. The cleansing of sin and the promise of eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus, who is lifted up on high, seated on the throne at the right hand of God in complete authority.

And this small group of Christians, these small groups of Christians to whom Peter is writing, living in a hostile Roman Empire, they're like Noah's small family in a teeming mass of sinful humanity.

A small number who responded to God's offer of salvation. And the power of God that raised Christ Jesus from the dead is working in them and will keep them to eternal life.

[22 : 20] That same power that is working in us also. Praise the Lord, we are saved. We are saved. And Christ Jesus reigns on high at the right hand of God.

And that is reality. And that is why Peter is a glass is overflowing kind of man. And that is why we need to be a glass is overflowing congregation.

Because we worship a great Lord and we have a great gospel to proclaim in every circumstance, in every time.

God bless you. Amen. Amen.