

Life Together

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Date: 08 January 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. This January, we will introduce a few faithful followers of Christ, which is in our era, closer to our time, and who have run the race of faith.

Today, I will present a German pastor and theologian who was imprisoned and later martyred near the end of World War II for plotting to assassinate Hitler.

His name is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. During his imprisonment, the guards were friendly to him and secretly took him to the cells of desperate, dismaying prisoners to minister to them.

They preserved his papers, essays, and poems, and even established a complete secret career service to his family and friends outside.

And before his imprisonment, he was a senior minister in Barcelona, in England, also back in Germany. And he taught at a Bible college in New York for a year in 1930, where he saw firsthand the struggle of the black Christians and the fight for equality in a so-called Christian nation.

[1 : 2 5] He also traveled and preached even to Havana, Cuba. He was contemporary with Karl Barth and Gandhi in India, and he was there when the wars went up in Berlin.

He also traveled and transferred to Vossenburg in the last few weeks of his life. They cut off all his contact with the outside world.

And he spent those few weeks with men and women of many nationalities, Russian, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Italians, and German. One of them, an English officer, wrote, Bonhoeffer always seems to me to spread an amnesty of happiness and joy over the least incident, and profound gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive.

He was one of the very few persons I have ever met for whom God is real and always near. Bonhoeffer's parting word to this Englishman, as he was led out by two civilians to face a gallop, was, This is the end, but for me, it's the beginning of life.

A few years after his execution in the concentration camp at Vossenburg, a nearby church unveiled a tablet with this inscription, which translates to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a witness of Jesus Christ among his brethren.

[3 : 0 3] Born February 4, 1906, in Breslau, and died April 9, 1945, in Vossenburg. Bonhoeffer left a legacy of writing that has become a prized testimony of faith and courage for Christians worldwide.

Bonhoeffer's most widely read book called The Discipleship begins, Cheap grace is a mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace.

So he's the first one that uses the term cheap grace. And today, I will mainly refer to a book called Life Together, where he opens with the psalm that we read just then, how great and present it is with God's people who live together in unity.

Life Together is an inspiring account of a unique fellowship in an underground ceremony during the Nazi years in Germany.

It can be treated as a bread for all people hungry for the real life of Christian fellowship. The publisher suggested every Christian should make it their resolution resolution to read Life Together at the beginning of every year, which I could not agree more.

[4 : 20] Reading it will help us to reset our expectation and understanding of what genuine Christian fellowship is all about, and allow us to refocus on our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our current preaching series is based on Hebrews 12, verse 1 to 3, where it says, Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let's throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let's run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, for the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorned his shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endures such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. So many situations in life can cause us to grow weary and lose our hearts, especially when we are facing now living in COVID.

I remember it was about beginning or mid last year that I accepted that there will not be a post-COVID time soon, and we are to live with the realization that the virus will not go away, which helped me to face the daily life with renewed energy.

[5 : 47] I find Bonhoeffer's life together helpful also in providing two crucial realizations. A Christian comes together only through Jesus Christ, and a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ.

Apostle John reminded us in 1 John 4, 7-10 that, Dear friend, let's love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only Son into the world, that we might live through him.

This is love. Not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. We have just celebrated the birth of Christ a few weeks ago.

I hope amidst all the hassle and best of gift weapon, gift giving, and abundant visiting, you have a chance to stop and think about the meaning of Christmas.

[6 : 52] Christmas is how God showed his love among us, by sending his one and only Son into the world as an atoning sacrifice for our sin, so that we might live through him and love one another.

Christians love one another and live through Jesus Christ is a given and non-negotiable. The implication of these verses is striking, especially in verse 7 and 8.

If the characteristic of your life is not a God-like love that even cares for its enemy, then you don't know God. And by logical extension, you have not been born of God.

Why? Because God is love. It's God's very character, essence, and nature to love.

And as verse 10 demonstrates, God seeks the best for us, even at high cost and expenses to himself. If you have been struggling to hold a God-like love towards others, especially those you consider undeserving of your affection, those you have a legitimate, justifying reason to withhold your love, now is the time to question those reasons in light of what God has done for you in Jesus Christ to free you to love.

[8 : 21] Christians living under the love of God and others in a free country like Australia face another challenge in their relationship.

We can take it for granted that Christians have the privilege of living among other Christians. At the beginning of Life Together, Bonhoeffer provides a timely reminder of what God has done through Jesus for us.

It says, Let me encourage you to read through and mark the teaching of Hebrews 12 again, to fix your eyes on Jesus, who endured the cross and strong its shame.

Consider him, our Lord Jesus, who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Keep spreading the good news of God's salvation and bring many people into the fellowship of God.

The tremendous and challenging application of this command is that we must go to those who do not want us there. We must share the gospel they don't want to hear.

[10 : 04] We must love those who may hate and even kill us in return, because Jesus connected us to him and each other through the new birth. We must live like Jesus among our friends and enemies.

And that's what Bonhoeffer did. Bonhoeffer saw Christian fellowship as a gift of grace, a gift of the kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us.

Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life, reviled a Christian, praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart.

Let him thank God on his knee and declare, this is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren. Bonhoeffer saw Christian come together only through Jesus Christ, because without Christ, there's a discord between God and man, and between man and man.

Christ become the mediator and make peace with God among men. Without Christ, we shall not know God. We will not call upon him nor come to him.

[11 : 18] And without Christ, we also would not know our brothers and sisters, nor can we go to them. Christ broke down all those barriers and made it possible for God and man and men and men to reconcile.

So Christ should be the only reason that Christians come together in fellowship. Christian fellowship is not some extraordinary social experience, or some wishful idea of religious fellowship.

The only reason that Christians come together in fellowship should be Christ. John 17, 23 recorded Jesus' prayer for all his believers before he died.

He said, he prayed, My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one.

Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, so that they may be brought to complete unity.

[12 : 39] Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Jesus prays for you, me, and all believers to be as one as the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Triune God is one in perfect unity. He has been working since that prayer to bring us, bring his follower to the oneness of unity through his Spirit.

The Spirit that he gave us to help us to know that we live in him and he in us. As I say in 1 John 4, 13, Jesus creates a community for us to acknowledge our need for each other and in turn, draw us into the perfect unity he prayed for.

Jesus Christ puts Christians together to testify and reveal to each other the works God has done in their life. Bonhoeffer illustrated the fantastic mechanic of this working among Christians.

He said, God has put the work of God in Jesus Christ into the mouth of men and women so that they communicate and share them to others. When the word of God strikes one person, he speaks it out to others.

[14 : 04] God willed us to seek and find his living word in the witness of others, in the mouth of a fellow human. Therefore, Christians need another Christian who speaks God's word to them.

They need another Christian again and again when they become uncertain and discouraged. For they cannot, we as Christians cannot, help ourselves without betraying the truth.

Christians need other Christians as bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. We need other Christians solely because Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer highlighted that the Christ in our heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of other believers.

When our own heart is uncertain, the word of Christ come from other Christians is sure. When Apostle John said in verse 12, no one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

It means that when Christians love one another, that mutual Christian love is evident that the unseen God, who was once revealed in his Son, is now shown to his people.

[15 : 20] Christians need each other to make visible the invisible God that this world so desperately need to see and come to know. Bonhoeffer taught that the goal of all Christian community of living a common life in God's word is to meet one another as bringers of salvation, of message of salvation.

God permits us to meet together and give us a fellowship of a community of believers for that purpose, for us to bring the message of salvation to each other.

He makes it necessary for us to meet each other. Is that what you have imagined for a Christian community? A place for you to be Jesus to others, to bring the message of salvation, helping others to understand the gospel, the great news of justification through grace alone.

God's grace is the basis of the longing of Christ for one another. If you have not been actively seeking to join a Christ-loving, life-changing community and have been missing in action in fellowshiping with other Christians regularly outside Sunday corporate service, in that case, you are fighting with Jesus in his plan for you to be one with other.

You are running in the opposite direction in the race of faith. It's time to stop fighting with God for whatever reason you might have of not joining in building a community of followers of Christ.

[17 : 03] As Bonhoeffer puts it, Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. If you are not regularly in a community of Christians, you are not living your Christian life properly.

To Bonhoeffer, when God's Son took on flesh, He truly and boldly took on our pure grace, our being, our nature, ourselves.

This was the eternal counsel of the giant God. Now we are in Him, where He is. There we are too, in the incarnation, in the cross, in His resurrection.

We belong to Him because we are in Him. That is why the Scripture calls us the body of Christ. As the body of Christ, we are called to live in unity.

However, looking through the Bible and world history, unity among God's people was very short-lived and imperfect. But the absence of unity is the best teacher of the blessing of unity.

[18 : 20] Looking back at the last section of our text today from 1 John 4, starting from verse 17, this is how love is made complete among us, so that we will have confidence on the date of judgment.

In this world, we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We love because He first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates his brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen.

And this is, He has given us this command. Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sisters. Too often, Christians are not known for the love of others or unity.

Sometimes, these criticisms are unjustified. But unfortunately, at other times, we are guilty as charged that we are not known for our love for each other and for our unity.

[19 : 35] And this is often manifest in our Christian relationship with our leaders. A common mistake of a Christian is to think that our pastor and minister are there to take care of us, that they do not need our encouragement.

They are there to show God's love to us. However, they are also there to correct us and set us straight. We have an unhealthy sense of fear and worry about being corrected.

We grow a love-hate relationship with those God put into authority in our life. And we end up fighting with and not fighting for our pastors.

If we claim to love God yet hate the brother or sister, we are liars. If we do not love those who we see daily, how can we love God whom we have not seen, especially those God put into our life to lead us?

That's why I got a little gift for everyone. I bought it for you, okay? Out of my own pocket. But because I found this very, very helpful, I really want you to read this.

[20 : 45] I believe this book, Fight for Your Pastor, written by Peter Orr, which is a New Testament lecturer at Moore College, is an excellent companion to the book of Life Together, written by Bonhoeffer.

Please take this home. I left one in each alternative seat. If you don't have one, grab the one in front of you or come over here. There's more down here in the box.

Please take this. Read it at least once a year. We want you to learn from this book. There are seven action points for us to care for our pastor.

Fight, encourage, listen, give, forgive, submit, and check. This may not come naturally, but they are vital for our Christian community to have a healthy relationship between those who are leading and those who are following.

These seven actions will provide an excellent balance to what Bonhoeffer has said about what a Christian leader should do in the fellowship of Christ. And as we consider how we should run the race of faith, resetting our expectation and understanding of what genuine Christian fellowship is all about, allow ourselves to refocus on our Lord Jesus Christ.

[22 : 13] Let's also consider how we are to care for those God put into our life to guide and lead us. My wish for everyone in 2023 is the same as Paul's word to the brothers and sisters in Corinth.

I hope you memorize this verse for this year. It's from 1 Corinthians chapter 10, 31. Maybe you can read it together. So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. To God be the glory.