

Cultivating Christian Love

1 Peter 3:8-12, Psalm 34, Romans 12:17-21

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In 1 Peter 3:8-12, Peter gives us a pattern for how Christians ought to live so that they'll be enabled to love the life they live.

When you study 1 Peter, you'll see that love and its virtues are a recurring theme in his letters.

He believed that the development of these virtues would enable us to inherit blessings and to find life and peace.

These virtues that Peter stresses keep us useful and productive in our Christian walk, while keeping us in fellowship with God and His people.

They should be a concern for every Christian because as we exercise these virtues they will open a life of blessing which God desires for us to enjoy.

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1 Peter 3:8 begins by listing five virtues found in Christian love:
"Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble."

When heeded, these admonitions form an ideal Christian and if demonstrated in the fellowship, an ideal church.

First, we're to strive for harmony by pursuing the same goals which is accomplished by being like-minded. Now, this doesn't mean total uniformity, just cooperation in the midst of diversity.

This is why God gave His people a variety of gifts, talents, backgrounds, and personalities. But He also recognized that differences of opinion will exist, too.

Even though opinions are different, believers are expected to work together in unity. Christians are to be governed by the purpose of Christ so that differences do not divide but rather enrich the church.

Christians may differ on how things are done but they must agree on what is to be done and why.

A man once criticized D.L. Moody about his methods of evangelism. Moody replied. *“I’m always ready for improvement. What are your methods?”*

The man confessed that he did little evangelism. Moody said, *“Then I’ll stick to my own.”*

This is why, whatever methods we use, we must seek to glorify Christ, win the lost, and build the church up in Christ Jesus. Some methods may not be scriptural but there’s always room for variety in the church.

A second evidence of love is being *“sympathetic,”* or having a genuine *“feeling for and with”* the needs of others and being responsive to those needs.

The ministry of reaching out in love to people needs to be a part of our worship experience. And, of course, it needs to be a vital part of our personal ministry within the body of Christ.

In my opinion, that’s why small groups are important within the church family. They provide an atmosphere of love and trust.

This encourages the participants to share personal needs and gives us a chance to *“bear one another’s burden.”* (Galatians 6:2)

Next, Peter tells us that we need to have a genuine love for the brethren. Christian love is seeing and treating each other as brothers and sisters.

Whatever differences we have, the lack of love for one another should not be one. If we love Jesus, and are becoming one with Him, we'll love one another.

The fourth virtue is to “*be compassionate*” toward others. Compassion indicates being affectionately sensitive and caring. In the Roman world this wasn't seen as a virtue, and it's easily robbed in our day.

We're deluged with so much bad news and fake news that it's easy for us to become insulated and unfeeling. But our hearts need to be broken with the things that break the heart of Jesus.

We need to cultivate a tender heart that can be moved by the suffering which another person endures.

The last virtue Peter lists is to be “*humble*” in spirit. A humble person puts others ahead of themselves. Humility is a virtue Jesus taught when He washed His Disciples feet.

Jesus was willing to be the servant of all. Believers with these five qualities assist the Church in becoming what God intended it to be.

But the development of these qualities didn't come natural for Peter. In his early days with Jesus, he was loud, aggressive and strong-willed.

Then the Holy Spirit changed Peter, molding his strong personality as God taught Him compassion, love, tenderness, and humility. If God can do that for Peter, He can do the same for anyone who'll let Him.

Oswald Chambers reminds us in *My Utmost For His Highest*: *"In the spiritual life, beware of walking according to natural affinities. Everyone has natural affinities; some people we like and others we do not like. We must never let those likes and dislikes rule in our Christian life. If we 'walk in the light,' as God is in the light, God will give us communion with people for whom we have no natural affinity."*

It's natural to have likes and dislikes. But we honor God when our relationships, compassion, love, humility, and kindness are God-ordered.

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It is because of these virtues that we are able to return good for evil as the first part of verse nine commands, "*Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult.*"

But are we to be virtuous only toward those who treat us fairly? No! We're to demonstrate love toward anybody who abuses or insults us.

Our natural inclination is to strike back when struck, but a Spirit-filled Christian must follow the teachings of Christ. As it is written, "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*"

The verb tense in this passage indicates believers were trying to settle injuries and insults on their own terms.

Peter tells them to stop retaliating. Repaying evil for evil and insult for insult has no place in the Christian's life.

In our fallen world, it's often deemed acceptable to tear people down verbally or to get back at them if hurt.

In God's kingdom, revenge is unacceptable behavior, as is insulting someone, no matter how indirectly it's done.

As believers, we are to rise above getting back at those who hurt you. We need to learn to forgive them. Instead of reacting angrily, we should pray for them.

Faithful believers are to bless their opponents rather than to repay them in kind.

“Repay evil with blessing” is the command of Scripture. By doing so we imitate God and prove ourselves His children.

As Christians we can live on one of three levels. We can return evil for good, which is the satanic level.

We can return good for good and evil for evil, which is the human level, or we can return good for evil, which is the divine level.

Jesus is the perfect example of the good for evil approach. God’s children aren’t to operate on the basis of justice but on the basis of mercy because this is how God deals with us.

This admonition must have meant much to Peter himself, since he once tried to fight Christ’s enemies with a sword.

When Saul was an unconverted rabbi, he used every means possible to oppose the church; but when he became a Christian, Paul never used human weapons to fight God’s battles.

When Peter and the Apostles were persecuted, they depended on prayer and God’s power, not on their own wisdom or strength.

Ralph Waldo Emerson keenly observed, *“In every man there is something of which I may learn of him, and in that he is my teacher.”*

This is true even of our worst critics. They may be prejudiced and their scathing remarks may arouse a natural antagonism. Yet what they say may contain more than a grain of truth.

If nothing else, their criticism should remind us that perhaps our own actions and motives aren’t as pure and worthy as we think they are.

We all have a natural tendency to want to retaliate when someone questions our motives and actions, but Scripture tells us to respond differently.

We're instructed to pray for those who criticize us. We're to bless them, not only because it's right but also because we may learn something from them that'll help us become a better person.

In fact, adverse remarks could be a blessing in disguise if you take a positive attitude and draw from them a new understanding of your own shortcomings.

That's why, instead of retaliation, we're commanded to extend the blessing and forgiveness God first gave us.

1 Peter 3:9b, *"On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."*

Great personal wrong, by word or deed, shouldn't hinder us from blessing another. Blessing them indicates seeking their highest good.

What we say and do advances God's perfect purpose and plan for them. We're to admire in them what can be discerned as praiseworthy, and to pray for their true blessedness.

We're to speak good of those who speak evil of us. The reason we're to bless others is because we were called for the very purpose of inheriting a blessing.

God didn't just bless us, He called us to bless others because we've been made a blessing and a blessing.

The vilest reproaches of men will be more than made up for when we come into possession of our inheritance.

Those that revile and curse us for Christ's sake only add to this future inheritance of glory in heaven.

God says we *"inherit a blessing"* when we treat our enemies with love and mercy. By blessing them we open the door for the blessing of God's greater grace upon us. Remember, we reap what we sow.

Warren Wiersbe once stated, *"Persecution can be a time of spiritual enrichment. The saints and martyrs in church history all bear witness to this fact."*

We who belong to Christ, and are possessed by Him, should bring blessings wherever we go and whatever we do. Because when we bring blessings to others, we're also blessed.

The goodness of God is a blessing to everyone.

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A second incentive for exercising Christian graces and upholding our duty to be holy is given in verse 10.

1 Peter 3:10, *"For, Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech."*

Peter pulls from his treasure house of Scripture. This quote comes from Psalm 34.

Psalm 34:12-16a, *"Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry; but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil."*

Life is difficult and too often, to those who have given up the pursuit of worldly pleasure, it can seem full of problems and tribulations. But good days of sweet communion with God are ours to be grasped.

In fact, there are several conditions that God would have His people fulfill in order to experience the good days that His sustaining companionship will bring.

First, we must deliberately decide to love life. This is an act of the will. It's an attitude of faith that sees the best in people and situations.

We can decide to endure life and make it a burden, or to enjoy life because we know God's in control.

Peter's not suggesting some kind of unrealistic psychological gymnastics that refuses to face facts, rather he's urging his readers to take a positive approach to life and make the most of every situation.

Many of the original recipients of his letter were experiencing hardship and misery. He asks them, through the Psalmist, to love life because life is a gift from God and so are good days.

Christians, whose hearts are attuned to God and His Word, can participate in the fullness of life here on earth and afterward with Christ in eternity. We who experience the Lord's special love should love life.

Second, we must control our tongues. The word "evil" in this passage refers to the spoken word. The tongue is a world of evil that, without proper restraint, corrupts and destroys both speaker and listener.

Warren Wiersbe has stated that *"Many of the problems of life are caused by the wrong words, spoken in the wrong spirit. This is why every Christian should read James 3 regularly and daily pray Psalm 141:3, "Set a guard over my mouth, LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips."*

A Christian must also keep his lips from speaking deceit. To use the gift of speech deceptively casts doubt upon what you're saying in everyday situations and ultimately upon what you say about Christ.

When a Christian frees his heart from all falsehood and deceit, he can follow Christ's example and love life and enjoy the good days here on earth.

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In the first part of verse 11 we find the another prerequisite for living a good life in God's presence: "*They must turn from evil and do good.*"

The third precondition for loving life and enjoying good days is that we must do good and hate evil. Both the positive and negative are needed.

The avoiding of evil because we despise and loathe it occurs before one can do eternal good to any extent. The inclination to any evil taints the good one attempts to do and therefore must be shunned.

I heard a humorous story about a little girl who was making angry faces at a bulldog. Her mother noticed and asked her to stop. The little girl said, "*But Mom, he started it!*"

In one sense, the girl was right. A bulldog naturally looks tough and mean. But the girl gained nothing by competing with him in making faces.

So too, the person, who thinks he must return every angry look he sees or repay any hurtful deed that is directed toward him, will have a never-ending and profitless job. In the end he's the one who'll suffer.

That's why, as heirs of the grace of God, we should be gracious in our attitude toward others.

The spirit of the world says, *"Get even with those who mistreat you."*
The Spirit of Christ says, *"Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you."*

If you want to know how spiritual you are, ask yourself, *"What's my attitude toward those who mistreat me? Am I kind, considerate, and loving in my words and actions toward them?"*

To live like Christ isn't natural; it's supernatural. Only as we yield to the Holy Spirit can we ever hope to exhibit the life of Christ.

Finally, we must seek and pursue peace. This is found in the latter half of verse 11, *"They must seek peace and pursue it."*

Together with David, Peter exhorts us to *"seek peace and pursue it."* Because peace is fragile and elusive, we can never take it for granted but must actively pursue freedom from strife and discord.

Jesus Himself pronounced the benediction, *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."* Peace is practiced by returning a blessing when an insult is given.

Too often we see peace as merely the absence of conflict. We only think of peacemaking as a passive role, but an effective peacemaker actively pursues peace.

The peacemaker anticipates problems and deals with them before they occur. When conflicts arise, he or she brings them into the open and deals with them before they grow unmanageable.

In fact, making peace is harder work than waging war, and it results not in death but in life and contentment.

How do you react to hostile criticism? If it causes you to strike back angrily at your critics, you need to learn from Jonathan Edwards.

Regarded by scholars as an insightful philosopher, Edwards was vindictively attacked by the ruling body of his church in Northampton, Massachusetts.

They felt he was wrong to teach that a person needed to be born again before taking part in the Lord's Table.

Although he was dismissed from his church, Edwards still maintained a loving and forgiving attitude.

One supportive member wrote of him, *"I never saw the least symptoms of displeasure in his countenance, but he appeared like a man of God, whose happiness was out of the reach of his enemies."*

Edwards was simply copying Jesus' example. When Jesus was insulted, He didn't repay it with an insult.

When He was falsely denounced, He remained silent, *"as a sheep before its shearers is silent."*

Do you have that kind of inner peace, even when criticized? As you ask the Holy Spirit for His help, you can, as Edwards did, respond in a Christlike way to false accusations or gossip.

Verse 12 gives us godly encouragement for seeking to adhere to these prerequisites that enable the believer to love life and enjoy good days.

1 Peter 3:12, *"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."*

The blessing that encourages and motives believers to walk in the way of love is that we have the gracious providence of God watching over us for our good.

God sees the people who do what is right and furnishes us with everything necessary for our daily benefit, defending us from hazards that cannot be used for our eternal good.

God renders ineffective all opposition against us while in His service. God supports us. But He more than supports us, God delivers us from our trouble, but in His time.

Nothing escapes God's view nor is anything beyond the control of His hand. No one should think God doesn't care. He cares beyond earthly calculation.

Another blessing for believers, who walk in the way of holiness, is that God is attentive to their prayers. When the righteous pray, He hears their prayers.

Although He may not immediately send an answer, even after repeated and persistent prayers, our requests always have a favorable acceptance before Him.

That's why we must understand that, during His delay, He's preparing a good answer. He answers not to gratify our lusts but for His glory and for building our faith and fortitude.

Note the contrast in the next phrase in verse 12, "*but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.*" As God sees the works of righteous believers so He sees those of people who practice evil.

Though God may not instantly or quickly judge, don't think that God over-looks their evil indulgence.

He's against them and He'll fulfill His eternal purpose to punish those who make provoking Him the constant course of their life.

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Conclusion

It's both the duty and necessity of God's people to encourage themselves in the responsibilities of love by reflecting upon the good days of sweet fellowship that God promises us.

This is especially needed if our enemies are taking advantage of us. We need to take hold of the blessed assurance that God hears our prayers and is watching over us for our eternal good.

His eyes are on His people and His ears receptive to their prayers. Trust God to provide and protect and let Him defeat your enemies.

Peter quoted these statements from Psalm 34, and it'd be profitable to read the entire Psalm as it describes what God means by good days, because they're not necessarily days free from problems.

A good day for the believer, who loves life, isn't one in which he's pampered and sheltered but one in which he experiences God's help and blessings in the midst of life's problems and trials.

It's a day in which a believer glorifies the Lord, experiences answers to prayer, tastes the goodness of God, and senses God's nearness.

The next time you think you're having a bad day read Psalm 34. You may discover that it can be a good day in which to glorify God.