

Life as a Christian

1 Peter 3:8-17

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It is the deep, deep love of Christ that welcomes us this morning and calls us to his Word to make us a people for himself, to live in the world. But what does it look like to live in the world as a Christian? We turn this morning to what is largely a summary set of verses for the section of 1 Peter that we have just gone through, as he's been looking at the nature of what it means to live as a Christian who belongs to Christ, to live in submission and living with respect towards everyone and towards others in various spheres of life. We've look at it in terms of being citizens. We've looked at it in terms of our workplaces and our marriages, last week, and now we look at this summary passage of 1 Peter 3:8-17, which demonstrates what life as a Christian looks like. But it also tells us how, then, do we get there from here. Reading 1 Peter 3:8-17.

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For

“Whoever desires to love life
and see good days,
let him keep his tongue from evil
and his lips from speaking deceit;
let him turn away from evil and do good;
let him seek peace and pursue it.
For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now, Lord, we ask that by the work of your Holy Spirit by which you are present with your people, that you would open our eyes, that you would open our hearts to what it means to live as a Christian. What does it mean to have a clear conscience that enables us to live this kind of life? Help us, we pray, that we might hear you and respond. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

This past fall was a film released called *The Intern*. It is Robert DeNiro playing with Anne Hathaway. Anne Hathaway plays the young CEO of an online clothing startup. Ben Whitaker is a seventy-year-old widower who had spent his entire career as an executive for a phonebook production company. And so he's now retired and alone, and he doesn't know what to do with each one of his days. He feels he still has plenty of life, and so he responds to an ad that he sees while walking in his neighborhood in

Brooklyn. And the ad is for a senior intern. As a community outreach, this company decided that they would hire interns, those who are retired who can come and be part of a young, vibrant company.

So Ben Whitaker goes, and when he goes into the company he is hired, and he is given the job of being the intern, the assistant, to the CEO, played by Anne Hathaway. She initially freezes him out, but he goes forward. And slowly, over time, over a series of weeks, he becomes one of the most popular people in the entire company. People want to be around him. People want to talk to him. Part of the reason is, when he's around others, it's very clear that he has absolutely nothing to prove. He's already lived life. He's had a good job. And so now he sees an opportunity to actually—though they don't use this term, it's very clear—he seeks to bless others. He's not trying to rob attention for himself. He comes along others. He helps them. He gives them life advice. He has ears. He's present. He works longer. Even though nobody's asking him to stay 'til the end of the day when his boss leaves, he's simply there. He's observant, and he pays attention. He draws people to himself. He has incredible character, and people are inextricably drawn to him.

Now, the byline of the film tries to give us a reason why people are drawn to Ben Whitaker, and it's this phrase: experience never gets old. And it's telling us, essentially, at least the way the world understands it, what would give a person the ability to move into a company where he's probably outperformed, he's certainly the oldest in the group—what would cause a person to be so magnanimous and others-centered, encouraging, observant? Well, surely it must be experience. They're right. The question is, what kind of experience gives a person the kind of Christian character that Peter is pointing to? So we're going to look at this in two ways. If you will, Christian personhood—what does it look like? Then the person of Christ. In two ways, it's talking about character and where character comes from. That is, a clear conscience rooted in Christ. What in the world is that? Well, let's look at it together.

Christian personhood. As you look at this passage, it's very clear that what Peter is doing is he's summarizing some of the things that he's already talked about in the previous verses. It's given to us in a very clean structure, but in a very quick way. He lists them together. Now, watch how they interplay together. I'm just going to number them quickly. First, he talks about having unity of mind: harmony, harmony with others, seeking unity with others. Secondly, sympathy: recognizing something is going on in someone else's life, and you're reaching out in a sympathetic way of listening to them. Though you may not have walked in their shoes, you recognize that they need something, and so you listen attentively. Thirdly, brotherly love: loving those who share your faith and serving them. Fourth, compassion: seeking to have a common interest, a co-passion with someone else. So if they are rejoicing, you rejoice. If they are weeping, you weep. In other words, you seek to go to where someone else and their experience is, and you are right there by them. You are sharing what it is they're experiencing. Co-passion: compassion. Fifthly and finally, he says, humility: being of humble mind. This idea of humility is this: you recognize that you are not the sum total of all things. You recognize your life before others is people see your successes, but you're also quick to recognize that you have plenty of faults. Because experience has taught you some days go well, some days they don't, some days you hit it into the short grass, some days you hit it right into the other fairway. You are humble in your abilities.

Now, the way this works is, these correspond in a structure. Unity and harmony correspond with humility. You are harmonious and seek unity with others because you recognize you need others. You live life with other people, and you do so with an open hand—not with arrogance and separation, but with humility. They correspond. Sympathy and compassion, they correspond. And then we have in the middle brotherly love. So the way in which you treat others, which is very much like what Peter has already talked about—and that is, you love the household of faith.

All of these things work together, I believe, for Peter, because what he's building for us is what I call as symphonic collaboration of character traits that gives us a vision for what the Christian life looks like. That when we go into our places of work or our places of sport and enjoyment and pleasure, or in our homes, or in our relationships, these are the things that would be descriptors of our lives if we

profess Christ. People are inextricably drawn to us, because they recognize that we don't live life arrogantly but rather humbly, and we seek to share our lives with them compassionately, and we have sympathy for others. We seek to love. We are others-centered. It will be something in which people are drawn to. This is what Peter is describing as the Christian life.

These are all given in imperative form. He's saying, "Do these things. Be sympathetic. This is what you ought to be as you profess Christ." But then he goes further. He goes a lot further when he says these things. He says in verse nine: "Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing." He is essentially saying that as a Christian, you recognize that there is—you're playing the long game, that what is to come—the kingdom that is to come, that is Christ, is coming. So you seek to sew the virtues of the kingdom now, because that is what you will receive.

But he says something interesting, and this is very helpful for us within the backdrop of our present day culture. And in our present day culture, what Peter is saying here is so incredibly difficult, so incredibly stark, that if we really listen to it, it should cause each of us to quake in fear. He's telling those of us who profess Christ that in a world that actually celebrates reviling others when they revile you, responding in kind, and doing so through Twitter or Facebook, all of these things are celebrated. And then we talk about them in our news. We compare the insults. And then we all sit back after we've all talked about it on the news, and we go, "Wow, can you believe so-and-so said that? What will they say next?" "Oh, look how they responded." You know? And then we say, "Wow, that was even a funny response to how they were insulted. Boy, you know, I really can't—that's just not presidential." Do you see? We live in a culture that simultaneously and paradoxically celebrates insult for insult and then on the other hand says, "Oh, how dare you?" This is the culture in which we live. And you can do so in 144 characters or less.

So Peter, in this cultural backdrop—and, by the way, preaching in a culture in the Roman Empire that absolutely did not celebrate humility whatsoever—is saying to them, do not revile or insult those who insult you. But he says, bless them. And it only takes a short amount of time to do a word search of the word "bless" to know what he's actually calling the Christian to do. He's calling the Christian in the face of insult and in the face of enemies to bless, which means to pray that God's favor and grace would be poured out on the heads of those who insult you. If that doesn't make you quake, I don't know what will. That is so incredibly different and such a contrast, not only to his own context, but particularly to ours.

What would the world look like? What would the testimony of the Christian look like? That in the face of insults, we say, "May the Lord bless you and keep you. May he make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace." Now, that's more than 144 characters, but I can assure you, that is completely reframing what it looks like to live in today's world.

And then he says these words in verse eleven as he's talking about: "Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace." Blessed are the peacemakers. The Lord actually calls us as far as it depends on us—and this, by the way, is the extension of blessing those who insult you—that it depends on you, that though your blessing of your enemies does not necessarily achieve peace, it doesn't mean we ought not to pursue it. As far as it depends on you, be at peace with others.

And then he wraps it up with a quote from Psalm 34. And in this, he's saying, "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." He's essentially saying, "Everything that I've just said to you is blessed by the Lord, for the Lord has led us in it." When he says the eyes of the Lord are on you, he hears your prayers, he turns his face towards you in hearing your prayers, and he will turn his face away from those who seek the opposite of what he's just said. And that turning his face towards us is another way of the psalmist saying,

“This is how God blesses. He blesses this kind of character.” He is in essence saying he’s not speaking from his own conscience; this is what the Lord desires in you.

Now, what does this mean for us? It would be very easy to just simply say, Jesus died for you, be forgiven. Now go live lives like this. But if we were to simply stop or simply see this as a passage which is calling us to good character—because it most certainly is—if that’s all we’re seeing it as, we’re simply doing what my friend Mike Metzger says, is we’re simply looking at a tree and counting the rings of the tree. Here’s what he means. If we look at character and that’s all that we look at, it’s like looking at a tree and only counting the rings, and you’re looking at the age of a tree. All the rings of a tree does is tell you how old it is. It doesn’t tell you whether it’s healthy or not.

Because if you look at this character traits like the rings of a tree, you can look at them and count them. You can observe them. You can measure them. You can measure these character traits. And we do so when we talk about character development. Who of us who has children, who of us wouldn’t want to see these character traits operative in our children? We want to encourage it. But it’s very easy to look at the character and say, “Do that.” And then we try to measure it like we would the age of a tree. The problem is, you can’t count the rings of a tree and know how it became the tree that it is. You need to look at something else. You need to observe its root system. And then you need to be able to tell, is that root system plugged into something that is healthy?

Well, that is precisely where Peter takes us next. When he leaves talking about the character, he then turns to talk about the root of that character, and that is a conscience rooted in Christ. Let’s look at it together. When he turns in verse thirteen, he says, “Now who is there to harm you?” He’s going to turn to the person of Christ. And when he does, he’s going to do it in a unique way. And some commentators don’t know how to understand and much of what he’s getting ready to say, so it’s up for interpretation to some degree of how it all holds together. But let’s see if we can do that.

And he says, “Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.” The first sign that your character is coming from something very different is first marked by this: you avoid the wrong kind of fear. In other words, you’re not afraid of what other people can do to you. You’ve not exalted human beings to the place where all your character is doing is trying to please them. Because that very much can be the root of character—you’re simply trying to be a people pleaser. And he’s saying, avoid being afraid of other people. What can they do to you?

So if our character doesn’t come from trying to please others or being afraid of what others can do to us, then where does it come from? So he says avoid the wrong kind of fear. Rather, he says, “honor Christ in your hearts.” There we go. In essence, he is saying this—you ought not to fear other human beings horizontally, for there is nothing they can do to you. And your character is not developed because you are afraid of them. Rather, in your heart—he doesn’t mean in private; he means in your soul, in the rootedness of who you are as a person—honor Christ. Meaning, exalt Christ. Worship Christ. Meaning, he is your source of life. He is the one to whom you look to for forgiveness, for salvation. And you recognize, in him is the one who has all power and all authority.

Therefore, if he has all the power and he has all the authority, and he is the one who is over your life, and you are submitting to him, then nothing anyone else can do to you matters. Because you belong to him. Meaning you are free from the deathtrap of people-pleasing. You are free from being afraid of other people and what they might do to you in terms of how you live your life and how they respond. Why? Because what matters most to you is Christ, because in your heart, you have set him apart. Meaning, you recognize, at the heart level, you belong to him.

And then he says something very curious. It’s this. He says, “But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience.” We don’t understand the

idea of what conscience is. But if we understand what a conscience is and a clear conscience, a good conscience, then we understand what Peter is telling us. A conscience is to the heart, to the soul, what eyes are to the body. It is a way in which we understand ourselves. Having a clear conscience is being able to look at your life, biblically speaking, and you recognize you are not perfect. You are a sinner. And the only way in which you are able to live life is as one who is in relationship to Christ. And you confess your sins to him, and you have been forgiven. And it is the Lord to whom you look to for life.

Having a clear conscience means not that you are perfect, but before the one who has all authority, before the one who has all power, you have been cleansed—you have been made new, which then frees you up. If you've been made new by Christ, if you've been saved by his body and his blood, and you have received forgiveness, then you don't go around living your life before others arrogantly or looking for attention. Rather, you go around as one who recognizes in humility of mind and heart that you are a sinner saved by grace, that you have been shown compassion, that you have been shown sympathy and grace and mercy, that you have nothing to prove. Why? Because you are plugged into someone who has already proven that he is worthy. He is the one who is worthy of honor and glory and majesty.

Therefore, your life becomes a reflection of who he is. Your character becomes a reflection not of who you are, puffing yourself up, but your life becomes a reflection of his character and who he's making you to be, which enables you then to move into other peoples' lives freely, loving others, caring for others, having sympathy and compassion and brotherly love. He's telling us that if you're going to aim at being this kind of person, we can't aim at the character traits first. We must look at their source. And when we set apart Christ in our hearts, we are then able to have a clear conscience. Because to set Christ apart is to say, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." I then am able to move out into the world to give a reason for the hope that I have within me.

So why do I seek to serve others? Why do I seek to do really good work? Why do I seek to have compassion and mercy on others and give to others? Is it because, well, I just was brought up really good home? No. My hope in this life, my hope in showing compassion and mercy and brotherly love, is rooted in the one who has already showed it to me. It's rooted in Christ. And I'm able to give a reason for the hope that I have. It's not based on my record; it's based on his. And this entire week of holy week is driving us to the crescendo of Easter Sunday. And the only way to Easter Sunday is through Good Friday. Good Friday is the place where we get on our knees, and we set Christ apart and recognize that we are in need of forgiveness and mercy and grace. But Easter Sunday morning is, I've been made new because Christ has been raised from the dead on my behalf. Therefore, I can be united to him, and my conscience and my heart and my life is rooted in him, which then frees me to go out into the world, to love the world as we have been loved in Christ. Which then enables me to respond to others in gentleness and respect, not in arrogance, not with insult for insult.

Because at the center of our faith and at the conclusion of this service, we will celebrate a supper in bread and in juice that says this: that we worship the Savior, Jesus Christ, who on the cross looked at everyone who insulted him, everyone who reviled him, everyone who abandoned him, and he said, "Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And he made a body of people, if you are a Christian, out of those who were once his enemies. And if you have that, then you have a clear conscience. Do you have a clear conscience? Is the source of your character your own strength, or is it the magnificent, incredible, sterling character of Christ? This is to what you were called: a clear conscience, a new life, to be a blessing in the world. Because if experience never gets old, we have something greater—redemption can never, ever be removed. And it will make us new. Let's pray.

Now, Lord Jesus, we ask that you would make us a people who are rooted in the work of Jesus Christ. And because of his work, we can have a clear conscience, forgiven. We are not perfect—in need of grace, a broken people made new, so that we can be a people who declare a hope in Christ, and that our work in the world would be a reflection of your character, to bless those who revile us, walking in

humility, in brotherly love, sympathy, and compassion, because Love has walked among us and made us new. In Jesus' name. Amen.