

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Christ's return

Praise the Lord for His plan to bring His creation to an end, and the fact that God's people need have no fear about this.

For myself

Pray about anyone you feel upset about, whether because of something said or something done that is difficult for you to handle.

For others

Dear Lord God, You are the source of all light, and You are brighter than the sun. Shine Your light into this world and dispel the darkness of its evil, its false pretences and its corruption. Expose these evils wherever they may be found, so that the whole world may see that there is true justice and love, and it may be found in You! AMEN

Meditation

Be light to me, Lord Jesus, be bright light;
Light which pierces through the darkness.

Be a bright redeeming hope for all the world
Illuminate a pathway for the walk of faith ahead;
Warn of danger with a beacon, pierce the gloom;
Reveal the scandals of unrepentant sinfulness;
Enlighten hearts confused by murky worldliness;
Emanate the awesome brightness of Salvation;
Flood the church with fresh yet ancient teaching;
Brighten all those minds engaging with God's truth;

Be light to me, Lord Jesus, be bright light;
Light which pierces, so even I may radiate for You.

Bible Passage

1 Peter 3:8-12

⁸ Finally, though, all of you should be of one mind, share your feelings, and be loving, kind and humble. ⁹ Do not pay back evil with evil, or curse with curse, but bless, instead, because you were called to do this so that you might inherit a blessing. ¹⁰ For,

‘Those who want to enjoy life
and see good days,
must guard their tongues from evil
and their lips from speaking deceit.

¹¹ They must turn from evil and do good,
and must seek peace and pursue it.

¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous
and his ears are attuned to their prayers,
but the Lord is set against those who do evil.’

Review

This is a wonderful passage of scripture containing Peter’s advice about Christian fellowship. He writes clearly, and everything he says is directly applicable to us today, and is well worth remembering. It is likely that most of this comes from standard instructions given to converts before baptism, and it addresses the integrity of the Christian community; Peter is strongly advising those who are baptised to accept their responsibilities in Christ.

The passage falls easily into two halves. Firstly, there is a list of qualities which describe how to fulfil Christ’s command to ‘*love one another*’ (3:8 – see John 1³:34f.), and this is followed by advice about how to deal in a forgiving manner with issues which arise within the fellowship of believers, ‘*do not pay back evil for evil ... bless ... because you were called to do this*’ (3:9). Secondly, Peter quotes from Psalm 34:12-16 (3:10-12). If you read this Psalm in your Bible you will find that it deals with roughly the same issues as the previous two verses, but in reverse order (see later study). This cannot be mere coincidence, which is why we think Peter was delivering a well thought out set of instructions, not preaching or teaching ‘freestyle’.

After the earlier controversy of Peter’s words about the submission of women (3:1-4), the principles in this text are firmly rooted in equality. No distinction is made between male and female when it comes to being of ‘*one mind*’, ‘*sharing feelings*’, or being ‘*loving, kind and humble*’ in Christian fellowship (3:8). All this is readily understandable, though being of ‘*one mind*’ does not mean that Christians should conform in every aspect of life; rather, it means agreement within the fellowship about the essential things of God. Sometimes we assume that agreement within the church is impossible to achieve, but Peter has no difficulty asking us to accept that basic faith can be agreed by all Christians.

The other components of advice in verse 8 are clearly worthwhile for any group of people. We cannot know how to help one another, for example, unless we share our thoughts in a spirit of mutual love, kindness and humility (3:8). In addition, Peter highlights the ‘*tongue*’ (3:9,10) and its power to either curse or bless (see 3:9). There is little room for us to manoeuvre here because God see all things; the best course of action for any Christian is to ‘*seek peace and pursue it*’ (3:11). God Himself knows the attitude and heart of a disciple, though He is watching us not so much to catch us out, but to reveal the truth so we may face it and deal with it.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V8 **'Finally, though, all of you'**

Other translations:

'Finally, all of you' (NIV, NRSV etc.)

You will not find the word 'though' in most translations. I have included it because the Greek contains a small particle 'de' which indicates that this subsequent advice is by way of contrast to what has been said previously, which is Peter's advice about marriage relationships and the responsibilities of men and women in marriage.

V9 **'in order that you might inherit a blessing'**

Other translations:

'instead, give a blessing' (CEB)

'repay with a blessing' (NRSV)

This last part of the verse is interesting. The verb is not the usual one for 'inherit, but means 'to take possession of' implying the receipt of something that is yours by right. Inheritance is the nearest we can get to this in English. The idea is that we inherit God's Kingdom blessings by acting in a godly manner.

V10

The whole of this verse is written in the singular; 'he who wants to enjoy life ... must guard his tongue ...' However, this is a general statement, and it is therefore better in modern English to present a general statement in the plural rather than the singular, and this is what I have one here.

Further Comments

The five qualities of Christian love (3:8)

In verse 8, Peter calls on all Christians to share these five qualities;

- to be 'of one mind' (see also Rom. 15:5, Phil. 2:2),
- to 'share feelings' (see also Rom. 12:15, 1 Cor 12:26),
- to be 'loving' (see Rom. 12:10, John 15:12),
- to be 'kind' (see also Eph. 4:32 and Col 3:12)
- and to be 'humble' (see also Eph 4:2, Phil. 2:3f.).

The first thing to note is that the Greek word used for 'loving' in this verse is 'philadelphos' which means neighbourly love or family love and affection. It is not the great New Testament word 'agape' used by Jesus when He said 'love one another'. This is why I am able to say that these five go together to make up what it means for Christians to show 'agape' love to each other. Clearly, the greater love Jesus speaks of must include the normal social qualities of love ('philadelphos'), and we have already looked at what it means to be of one mind (see above). This leaves three other qualities for us to bear in mind; 'sharing feelings', 'kindness' and 'humility'.

The true quality of 'sympathy' or 'sharing ones feelings' is the mutual recognition of one another within the fellowship. In different cultures people feel differently about how much they share of each other, but it is impossible for us to know each other and show the true qualities of empathy and care if we will not reveal something of ourselves. It is in sharing our vulnerabilities that we often take the first steps towards healing, for example.

The quality of 'kindness' frequently appears in lists of godly qualities such as the 'Fruit of the Spirit' (Gal 5:22f.), and no-one can ignore its importance to the Christian witness. By kindness, the Bible does not mean having a kind attitude, though that is essential if kind deeds are to be done, it generally means those kind deeds by which we help each other in times of difficulty or in simple acts of care and love. No-one can underestimate the effect of acts of kindness to true fellowship, and it is a mark of loss of fellowship when people do nothing for each other!

The last quality of being 'humble' is interesting, because Christians today know that true humility is exemplified by Christ, as in riding into Jerusalem on a donkey (Matt 21:1f.) What is not so well known is that the word from which humility come in Greek means 'base' or 'simple' and it has a somewhat negative meaning. The church took that 'base' word and by using the example of Christ, turned its meaning around to refer to a quality of service and self effacement which was not otherwise described in the Greek language. The word 'humble' itself came from very humble origins! Certainly one who read Peter's letter in the Greek would have spotted this, whereas we, for obvious reasons, do not.

The way to inherit a blessing (3:9)

In verse 9, a fundamental principle of Christian fellowship is described succinctly, and is worthy of our fullest attention. Keeping to this will avoid many a fraught church meeting and theological argument! 'Do not pay back evil with evil, or curse with curse, but bless ...' (3:9). It is a natural temptation for all people to return like for like, because we feel justified that if someone else can behave in a certain way to us then we are entitled to behave like that to them. Of course, the reason why such an attitude will always create trouble is because what people feel and what they say or do is not always as linked as we might like to think. Many a person feels hard done by because of someone else's words, for example, when no evil was intended, and the consequences of a bad reaction to this can even create problems when they did not exist in the first place! The devil will use our desire for vengeance through word and deed with glee, to create havoc in any Christian gathering!

Our duty before God, as Peter so clearly saw, is to return blessing when evil is done to us or when we are cursed by someone's words. All it takes is for us to do two things, and preferably in this order; firstly to remember that Jesus died for our sins and did not return our evil back on us, but saved us, secondly in the light of our Saviour's love for us, we can then access the power to act in the same way towards others. Just as not everyone who Jesus loves will love Him, so not everyone who we bless in such circumstances will realise what we are doing and cease either to do evil to us or curse us. However, by acting rightly before both God and others, we are justified, and keep ourselves pure and blameless before God.. We may not be able to do this all the time, but we should be able to do this enough to know the power of Christ's salvation at work in our lives and know that it works!

The confirmation of Psalm 34 (3:10-12)

Peter has constructed his advice to fit in exactly with Psalm 34:12-16, which starts now with similar guidance to that found in verse 9. If we desire the 'good days' (3:10, by which the Psalmist would have meant the 'blessing of God' and Peter would have meant the 'Kingdom of God', then the tongue must be controlled so that we do not speak ill advisedly; as the psalm goes on to say, our God-given task is to 'turn from evil and do good' (3:10). No-one is able to deal with either the tongue or the fractious nature of human relationships without a combination of personal intent and godly assistance. The Holy Spirit has been given to

God's people precisely to help us in our need, and those who complain that they are simply not able to live up to these standards of Christian faith have unfortunately discounted the very source of a Christian's power! By the grace of God and the help of His Spirit, our task is to 'seek peace and pursue it!' (3:11).

In other words, the Christian life is one in which we each actively pursue the godly qualities of Christian fellowship which please God, for 'the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous' (3:12). These words from the Psalm now remind us of the righteous moral obligations and qualities previously mentioned by Peter in verse 8 (see above).

The passage concludes with a word of reassurance, and the use of Psalm 34 enables Peter to offer this scriptural comfort to those to whom he spoke. The Psalm says that the Lord's 'ears are attuned to their prayers', which means that He is constantly aware of the struggles of His people. By this we know that the Lord wants us to succeed in our Christian endeavour, and not fail. His face is 'set against evil', and if we are as well, then the enemy is defeated!

Discipleship

Application

Receiving good advice

There are many golden passages of advice in scripture, and the Lord will lead us to one or other according to our particular needs and the problems we face either in our personal lives or in the fellowship of the church. This passage we have studied today is one which is helpful for Christians attempting to overcome the barriers and problems which beset a church community and move forward together in faith. We can find here a complete set of instructions about appropriate godly attitudes within the fellowship of believers and also an encouragement to bless each other in all things.

The difference between the fellowship of like-minded people, and true Christian love

Too often, Christian fellowship is based on groupings of people who get on well together because they are like minded about things of faith. This is an expression of 'philadelphos' (natural Christian affection), not the higher call to love one another with the 'agape' love of Christ which includes so much else; as this passage has taught us. Christian fellowship takes effort on our part, as we have learned. If we put in this effort and work at what it means to truly love each other with the qualities of love Peter mentions and also a positive attitude towards dealing with evil and refusing to return evil for evil, then we will build the true church of God which is His Kingdom here on earth.

Ideas for what to do

- *How do you feel that you measure up to the qualities described in this passage of scripture? Write down a list of the qualities as you see them and keep it in your diary. Look at it from time to time during your working day and see if you are behaving in a way which pleases the Lord, particularly towards other Christians.*
- *Set aside a week for special prayer for your own Christian fellowship or church. Prayer for the leaders and all those involved in it, and pray for God's blessing.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Look up some of the other Scriptures where speech and the use of the tongue are discussed (James 3:5f.). What does scripture consistently teach us?
2. Why is it so hard to love one another, and why do we have to work at it?
3. In your group, pray together to ask the Lord's forgiveness for things that have gone wrong in your fellowship, and do so expecting the Lord to bless you!

Final Prayer

Lord God and Almighty Father, create in Your people such a desire for holiness that Your Spirit moves afresh to bring renewal. Change our speech, change our worship, change our ministry, change our hearts, and empower us to do what is right for each other, for You, and for those amongst whom we live; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.