

**1 Peter 3. 8-12. Bethesda Bible Teaching. Morning of 5<sup>th</sup> April 2009.**

The passage for consideration this morning is 1 Peter 3, verses 8 to 12 ...

*Finally, be all of one mind, sympathetic, loving the brothers, compassionate, humble-minded - not repaying evil for evil or reviling for reviling - but on the contrary blessing - because to this you were called, that you might inherit a blessing.*

*For 'he who wishes 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 [lit. 'on'] those who do evil'.*

As you can see, our passage begins with the word 'finally'. But clearly this word doesn't signal the close of the letter – indeed, in terms of verses, Peter is only just over half way through.

But the passage which the apostle now begins *does* form the conclusion and climax of *the section* which he opened way back in verses 11 and 12 of chapter 2.

In the earlier part of this section he has dealt with the responsibilities of citizens to the governing authorities, of domestic servants to their masters, of wives to their husbands, and of husbands to their wives. But he now turns from giving instructions to specific groups to giving general exhortations applicable, as he says, to 'all' – to all classes alike ... turning from the natural relationships of state, household and marriage to the spiritual relationship which binds all believers together.

In our *opening* verse, Peter states briefly the duties which all Christians have to *other* Christians, and then, in the remainder of our passage, he sets out how they should act towards *non*-Christians – in particular to those antagonistic to the faith.

First, then, he states – without comment – five obligations which believers have to one another : being those of harmony – of sympathy – of brotherly-love – of compassion – and of humility.

These attitudes are, if you like, the five digits on the church's spiritual hand!

And I note, to change the metaphor, that the first and the last qualities function as bookends – both focusing on the mind ... covering *oneness* of mind and *lowliness* of mind.

First then, '**Be all of one mind**' - expressing unity of aim, purpose and outlook rather than unity of opinion. You know as well as I that it's unrealistic to expect believers to see eye to eye on everything. Although the majority of false cults operate on the principle of uniformity – where everyone is required to agree in detail with what the leader or leaders say, the true churches of God are marked rather by harmony ... recognising that, whereas we are one, we are not all the same ... nor in every detail do we always see things the same.

No doubt, Peter could remember how the Jerusalem church of early Acts was characterized by a common devotion to Christ, always acting with what Luke calls 'one accord'.<sup>1</sup>

Second, '**sympathetic**' – the meaning of the word not being confined – as it tends to be in English – to sorrow over the suffering and loss of others. But expressing rather a fellow-feeling with and for others – the kind of feeling which leads us to 'rejoice with those who rejoice' as well as to 'weep with those who weep'.<sup>2</sup> Peter has in mind sensitivity to the experiences of others.

**Third, 'loving the brothers'**. As I have said, it is unrealistic to expect that we will always agree on everything. But one thing we can agree on is that it is our duty to love one another. And it's important that we learn to distinguish having love and respect for other Christians from sinking our own convictions.

Speaking personally, I rank among my close friends a staunch Calvinistic Presbyterian and a convinced Charismatic. And, as many of us have proved, the key to such friendships is the knack of showing love when we do not agree ... what Charles Swindoll once labelled 'the ability to disagree without becoming disagreeable'.<sup>3</sup>

I guess that Peter could *still* hear His Lord speak of the distinctive badge of a disciple, 'By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another'.<sup>4</sup>

Fourthly, '**compassionate**'. The word Peter uses *originally* referred to the inner and vital organs of the body, the ancient world believing that a person's more intense feelings came from deep within the body. But, as used in scripture the word describes a person's emotional response of pity when faced with the misery and suffering of someone else.<sup>5</sup>

For his part, Peter had been privileged to see this quality worked out in action for three full years. Indeed, the corresponding verb is used in the New Testament *only* in connection with the Lord Jesus. Apart from the three occasions when it is found on the Lord's own lips,<sup>6</sup> it is only ever used – nine times in all – concerning Jesus Himself.<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, '**humble-minded**'.<sup>8</sup> We should have then, Peter says, not only *a tender heart*, but *a humble mind*. Such an idea didn't appeal to the Greeks in the least. *They* used the word only in a bad sense – to describe that which was base and mean.

But Peter had lived for over three years with the One who said, 'I am meek and *lowly* (the same word as here) in heart'.<sup>9</sup> Small wonder that the apostle returns to this virtue in chapter 5, urging his readers 'clothe yourselves with humility' – literally, 'gird yourselves with humility'.<sup>10</sup> How could Peter ever forget the example of selfless service which Jesus had set only hours before the cross, when He (the 'Lord') had washed his (Peter's) feet?

For the remainder of our passage, Peter switches from the duties we all have to one other to the believer's proper response to those who oppose the faith and who resort to persecution.

The apostle makes it clear that, in the face of such hostility, believers are not to retaliate – either by action ('repaying evil for evil') or by word ('reviling for reviling').

No one likes to be abused, especially when they have done nothing wrong. Our instinct is to cry, foul! And the natural response to hostility and provocation has, of course, always been that of Lamech back in Genesis 4, to threaten and look for revenge – to want to get one's own back – to pay back any wrong done, often with high interest.

But although, generally speaking, retaliation was an accepted part of pagan ethics – the Christian was not, Peter says, to resort to the world's weapons. And remember, please, that the man who now writes is the same man who once drew his sword and let fly at our Lord's assailants in the Garden of Gethsemane.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the apostle could still hear the echo of the Saviour's pointed rebuke!<sup>12</sup>

Peter's words are more or less identical to those of Paul in Romans 12; 'repay no one evil for evil ... do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good'.<sup>13</sup> 'Don't meet evil with evil', Paul was saying, 'because *that* is to be overcome by evil – the only thing which can overcome evil is good!'

Peter is in complete agreement. You do *not* fight fire with fire. 'Not repaying evil for evil or reviling for reviling - but on the contrary blessing' is Peter's way of putting it.

And that 'blessing' can be either oral or tangible – by word or by action.

Did Peter recall the teaching of our Lord in His so-called 'Sermon on the Plain'; 'I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you'.<sup>14</sup>

But Peter was aware, not only of the teaching our Lord had given, but also of the example He had left – to which the apostle had referred earlier ... 'Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example ... who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten'.<sup>15</sup>

It has been well said : to repay evil for evil is natural, to repay good for good is commendable, to repay evil for good is devilish, but to repay good for evil is Christ-like.

'Because to this you were called, that you might inherit a blessing', Peter adds. But to what does he refer? Does he mean that we are called *to bless our adversaries* or that we are called *to inherit a blessing*? And is the 'blessing' which we inherit – clearly that which we receive from God – is that 'blessing' our motivation for blessing others ... or is the blessing that which we receive from God because we bless those who have wronged us?

In other words, is the fact that I have been blessed – immeasurably blessed – blessed among other ways with an incorruptible, undefiled, unfading inheritance – is *that* my inspiration to bless others? Is the point that *I should bless* because *I have been blessed*?

Or is it that God's blessing is poured out in this present life on those who respond to evil and reviling by blessing their oppressors?<sup>16</sup>

For what it is worth, I understand Peter to be saying that God has called us, not only to share His eternal glory in the future,<sup>17</sup> and to walk and bask in His marvellous light now<sup>18</sup> ... but, echoing what he wrote towards the close of chapter 2 to household servants about enduring suffering patiently even when innocent, that God has called us to bless those who abuse us – whether by word or deed.

And, with my eye on Peter's quotation from Psalm 34 which follows, I take him to mean that *our* blessing of our adversaries in this way leads to our deeper and fuller enjoyment of *His* blessing during this present life – notwithstanding any suffering and trial through which we may have to pass. For according to the following verses, Peter knew that the blessing didn't stop when the suffering started ... that any such affliction is powerless to do the believer any real 'harm' – literally, 'evil' – and, indeed, that when endured righteously, it brings its own blessing.<sup>19</sup>

For, paradoxically, Peter is saying, it is possible to experience *the best of blessings in the worst of times*. Not that **I** have any right to comment – I have never known anything remotely like the persecution which Peter's readers then faced, still less that which they would be facing in the near future – but *Peter* had every right to say it. For I note that Luke records in Acts 5 how Peter and John left the Jewish council 'rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name'.<sup>20</sup>

Certainly the passage which the apostle quotes from David's Psalm 34 draws attention to the blessing – the truly satisfying life and the 'good days' in God's favour – with which He recompenses those who both refrain from doing or speaking evil, and who do good.

Having made it clear that God's people should never repay evil with evil, but should rather repay evil with good, it is in many ways fitting that Peter directs us to one of David's psalms. For, in his younger days, David knew all about being repaid evil for good<sup>21</sup> – even though, for his part, he was careful to repay good for evil.<sup>22</sup>

And of David's psalms none was more appropriate than that to which Peter went – Psalm 34. Apart from the fact that the apostle may well have been meditating on this psalm at the time – and I have my eye on the fact that he has already quoted from it in chapter 2<sup>23</sup> – the circumstances in which David composed Psalm 34 were certainly relevant to Peter's readers.<sup>24</sup>

For this psalm is David's expression of gratitude to God that He had delivered him from the power of Abimelech, the royal title of Achish, the king of Gath.<sup>25</sup>

And David's great Song of Deliverance spoke volumes to his readers of how, just as God had delivered David from the dangers of his sojourn among the Philistines in one of their five great cities (for such was Gath), so He could (and would) deliver those by His power<sup>26</sup> who now sojourned among their hostile neighbours in five Roman provinces – though not necessarily preserve and keep them physically, as He had David.

For, if they avoided evil in both word and action, they too could rely on God's care ... on His watchful eye<sup>27</sup> and His open ear – with no shadow between them and Him ... in spite of their many afflictions. And this even when the persecution which they now encountered would be intensified a hundred-fold – as it would be when, following the great fire of Rome, the *personal* persecution they were now suffering became *official* persecution by the State.

How wonderful to know that, although in Acts 1 a cloud took our Lord Jesus out of His disciples' sight, it never took *them* out of *His*. And that, if 'the face of the Lord' is 'on' His adversaries for ill, 'the eyes of the Lord' are ever 'on' His own for good. Nor that only ... but that He – the Lord – actually cups His ear to hear the very faintest cry of His very weakest child.

In summary, our passage tells us to love one another, to love our enemies and to love that life – that abundant – that blessed – life ... which is life indeed.<sup>28</sup> And if we really do want to enjoy that quality of life, then we too must not only turn away and abstain from evil, but must, as Peter himself once said concerning our Lord Jesus, go about 'doing good'.<sup>29</sup>

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Acts 1. 14; 2. 1, 46; 4. 24, 32; 5. 12; 15. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Rom. 12. 15.

<sup>3</sup> 'One of the marks of maturity is the ability to disagree without becoming disagreeable', Charles Swindoll.

<sup>4</sup> 'By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. Simon Peter said to Him ...', John 13. 35-36.

<sup>5</sup> One problem which we face is that our constant exposure to tragic news, affliction and distress can easily harden us, so that we become insensitive and even callous.

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 18. 27; Luke 10. 33; Luke 15. 20.

<sup>7</sup> 'When He saw the multitudes, He was *moved with compassion* for them ... When Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was *moved with compassion* for them, and healed their sick ... Jesus called His disciples to Himself and said, '*I have compassion* on the multitude, because they have now continued with me three days and have nothing to eat' ... Jesus *had compassion* and touched their eyes. And immediately their eyes received sight, and they followed Him, Jesus, *moved with compassion*, stretched out His hand and touched him ... Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was *moved with compassion* for them ... '*I have compassion* on the multitude' ... 'if you can do anything, *have compassion* on us and help us' ... When the Lord saw her, He *had compassion* on her and said to her, 'Do not weep', Matt. 9. 36; 14. 14; 15. 32; 20. 34; Mark 1. 41; 6. 34; 8. 2; 9. 22; Luke 7. 13 .

<sup>8</sup> The Textus Receptus gives 'courteous', but the older manuscripts read 'humble-minded'.

<sup>9</sup> Matt. 11. 29.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Pet. 5. 5.

<sup>11</sup> John 18. 10.

<sup>12</sup> 'Jesus said to him, *Put your sword in its place*, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword', Matt. 26. 52.

<sup>13</sup> Rom. 12. 17, 21; cf. 1 Thess. 5. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 6. 27-28. Cf. 'Being reviled, we bless', 1 Cor. 4. 12.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Pet. 2. 21-23.

<sup>16</sup> The verse is as ambiguous in Greek as it is in English.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Pet. 5. 10.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Pet. 2. 9.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Pet. 3. 1-14. Although the word translated 'blessed' in verse 14 differs from that twice rendered 'blessing' in verse 9. The word of verse 14 is that of Matthew 5. 10-11.

<sup>20</sup> Acts 5. 41.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Sam. 25. 21; cf. Psa. 35. 12; 38. 20; 109. 5.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Sam. 24. 17; cf. 1 Sam. 26. 21.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Pet. 2. 3 – quoting Psa. 34. 8.

<sup>24</sup> David had taken refuge outside of the Promised Land because, at the time, he was being unjustly persecuted by Saul – not dissimilar in many ways to the plight of Peter's original readers, who, because of unprovoked persecution, were now exiled.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Samuel 21.10–15. In the title of Psalm 34, Achish is called '(the) Abimelech' (meaning 'the divine king (*melech*) is my father (*'abî*)'). 'The Abimelech' was almost certainly a Philistine royal title (compare Gen 20.2-18; 21.22-32; 26.1-16, 26), in the same way that 'Pharaoh' was a title of the Egyptian kings. (Compare 'Caesar' among the Romans.) That is, Abimelech was the man's *title*, and Achish his *name*.

<sup>26</sup> 1 Pet. 1. 5.

<sup>27</sup> In Acts 1 a cloud took Him out of their sight – but not them out of His!

<sup>28</sup> Cntr. 'I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind', Eccles. 2. 17. There is a love of this life which can only lead to the loss of true life, John 12. 25. Peter is not, of course, encouraging that kind of selfish love.

<sup>29</sup> Acts 10. 38.