

Our Character and Calling As Followers of Christ (1 Peter 3:8-12)

Faith Evangelical Free Church | 4.15.18

A few weeks ago, on the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., several thousand Christians from different denominations, with different political affiliations, and perhaps most importantly from different races and ethnicities gathered at a convention center in Memphis, Tennessee, a mere two miles from the very motel where King was murdered, and held conference to discuss the issues of racism, diversity, justice, and unity within the Church in America (and around the world).

The event was a coordinated effort between several major evangelical leaders and organizations, including The Gospel Coalition and The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. Their goal was to create an opportunity *“to reflect on where Christians have been and look ahead to where we must go as we pursue racial unity in the midst of tremendous tension.”*¹

So for two days speeches were delivered, workshops were offered, panels were questioned, and in the city of Memphis Christians committed themselves to having reasonable, honest, and difficult conversations about what it means to love Jesus, preach the Gospel, build the church, and embrace the beautiful God-given diversity of the people of Jesus Christ.

I didn't go to this conference, but I did come across the videos of the talks as I prepared for this sermon, and it occurred to me that what these Christian brothers and sisters were attempting to do in Memphis that day is very much in line with, and an application of, 1 Peter 3:8-12, which we'll be seeking to learn from this morning.

In this passage we will see the apostle Peter call on all believers to be committed to one another, to seek understanding, pursue peace, and preserve our unity as a church even though at times we might disagree on matters of life and faith. The reason we need this unity and strong community is because we've been called to the hard work of sharing the Gospel and blessing all people (even and especially the people who don't like us very much). If we're going to do that well we need supportive “home base” -- we need the church.

We may not share all the differences, disagreements, struggles, or experiences of the Christians that gathered in Memphis a few weeks ago. We may not share the same troubles as the Christians who were facing hostility and persecution in the 1st century from people in their communities who were suspicious of and offended by the Christian faith.

But today's passage gives us an opportunity to honestly reflect on the tensions and disagreements we do struggle with, both from outside our church and from within. How should we treat one another as we wrestle with our political, theological, and personal disagreements? When the world looks at the Church -- when the community of Manhattan looks at *this* church -- will they see people who value unity or division? Grace or anger? Will they see something supernaturally distinctive...or just another worldly gathering of angry and bitter people? I hope and pray in our church they'll see the love of Christ reflected in our interactions, even our arguments, and in all our relationships.

We're not perfect people. Sometimes we're going to be wrong when we're absolutely sure that we are right, and sometimes we're going to be right but need to have patience and grace with those who are

¹ <http://mlk50conference.com> “About MLK50”

wrong. And sometimes we'll be stuck in a grey middle and be unsure of how to move forward. All of that is okay...as long as we can promise one another that we will treat each other with the respect and love that we prescribed in Scripture and modeled by our Savior.

That's what we'll be seeking to learn this morning as we continue our series on 1 Peter. But because we've been away from this series for a few weeks (celebrating Easter and baptisms) I need to remind you all of one crucially important point Peter makes at the beginning of this letter that impacts the way you and I understand all his commands, including those in 3:8-12.

Peter opened his letter by praising God for the new life He has mercifully and graciously given to us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Everything we're going to talk about today -- the character we want to build and the kind of life we want to live -- all of it comes to us as a gift of grace from God.

We can't be the kind of people we need to be on our own. Everything we're called to in 3:8-12 is so against the grain of human nature that it is impossible to pursue without the mercy of God. The anchor to all the instructions and commands given throughout 1 Peter is found in 1:3-5:

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Our temptation when considering how to apply biblical commands is often to tell ourselves "I can do better". But what we really need to be saying is "Thank God, for he has done better on my behalf, and now by His grace I can spend each day exploring the transformation He has caused in my heart." In God's great mercy we have new birth, a brand new life that is full of a living hope.

So friends, this morning let's explore what has been done for us, how we've been transformed, and what we've been called to do in the name and by the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The passage this morning is 1 Peter 3:8-12:

⁸ Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. ⁹ Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. ¹⁰ For,

*"Whoever would love life
and see good days
must keep their tongue from evil
and their lips from deceitful speech.
¹¹ They must turn from evil and do good;
they must seek peace and pursue it.
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."*

Be like-minded, be sympathetic, be loving with one another, be compassionate, and be humble. Five fairly simple, straightforward commands that biblical scholar Karen Jobes describes as “*the qualities [essential qualities] of Christian character needed to sustain the Christian community as it responds rightly to the hostility of an unbelieving society.*”

In other words, **this passage describes the kind of people we need to be in order to do the things we’ve been called to get done.** This is the kind of character that God expects us as individuals and as a church, to be learning and developing in our lives so that we can join Him in His redemptive work all over the world.

I like the way The Message Bible, edited by Eugene Peterson, translates v. 8:

*Summing up: Be agreeable, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, be humble. **That goes for all of you, no exceptions.***

We are all, **without exception**, commanded to pursue this sort of character. There is not a single trait in that list that Peter says you can skip or ignore. Be like-minded, sympathetic, loving, compassionate, and humble.

That’s a little daunting, isn’t it? It’s a lot to try to live up to, but remember, we’re not commanded to “do better” -- we’re reminded that God has already done better on our behalf through Christ, and we’re figuring out how to tap into and be further transformed by His power, **not our own**.

So let’s take a quick look at these five essential character qualities that Peter says we all need to be working on establishing and practicing in our lives.

The first essential character trait/quality he says we need is to be “like-minded.”

That’s a terrifically ambiguous yet loaded little phrase, isn’t it? Peter lists it with no additional explanation, which leads us to believe that it is a term his readers would have been familiar with and perhaps previously instructed about.

A quick survey of the New Testament would reveal that like-mindedness was indeed a hallmark teaching of the early church. In John 17 Jesus himself prayed his all his followers would have the same kind of closeness with one another that Jesus shared with the Father. Flip over to Acts 4:32 and you’ll find it says that “All the believers were one in heart and mind.”

And in 1 Corinthians 1:10 Paul too calls for unity and like-mindedness in the church:

10 I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.

An essential characteristic of Christian life and community is that we all strive to be like-minded. I’ve seen other translations use the word “harmonious” here, and I really like that because harmonies are made up

of different sounds or voices all coming together to create melodies and play the same song. That's a good picture of what being "like-minded" really means.

But remember that harmonies are not achieved by playing the same note. In the same way, like-mindedness isn't achieved by though absolute uniformity in every single thing. What Peter's really after is like-mindedness in our faith and belief in Christ. The "mind" we are supposed to grow to be more like is not our own, not our friends, not even our favorite pastors, writers, or theologians. Everyone, without exception, needs to be committed to measuring their faith and belief to the teachings of Jesus.

The goal of like-mindedness is not to create uniformity or diminish diversity. Instead, we want to bring our diversity -- our different ways of reading and interpreting Scripture, our different culture and traditions, our different doctrines and beliefs -- and lay all that diversity at the feet of Jesus. Some things will then need to change, some things might be cut away, and some things -- maybe even some things that surprise us -- might turn out to glorify God in ways we never expected. We figure all this out, together, through our common commitment to what God has revealed in Scripture and in our faith in Jesus Christ.

Now like-mindedness gets tricky because we don't always agree on matters of faith, belief and theology. Peter knew this (if you know much about Peter's life you know he spent quite a bit of time getting his theology corrected). Which is why our commitment to like-mindedness needs to be supported by the next four essential character traits, starting with sympathy.

The second essential characteristic of Christian life is being "sympathetic."

This means being sensitive to the feelings and emotions of others, AND allowing that connection to help you to be more understanding and patient with others, even if you disagree. Having this kind of character allows you to slow down and consider the experiences and perspectives of other people. A pastor named Alistar Begg once described being sympathetic as "*getting under the burden of those whose loads are too heavy and sharing the joy of those who loads are light.*" Part of the Christian life is being willing to feel what others feel. Jesus laughed and cried with people. We should too.

The third essential characteristic of the Christian life is the willingness to love one another.

The Greek word here is "*philadelpho*", which means the love we have for one another is a close, personal, familial kind of love. This is not about having warm, fuzzy feelings for everyone all the time. It's about remaining as fiercely devoted to your fellow believers as Christ is fiercely devoted to you.

He is our example, He teaches us how to love. So our affection for one another is a joy in the good times and a covenant or promise we fight to keep during the bad times. And as we struggle to have like-mindedness we are certainly going to bad times. Nevertheless, God's expectations are clear: we continue to love one another as Jesus loves us.

The fourth essential characteristic of the Christian life is to be compassionate.

The simplest definition I can give for compassion is that it is love in action. You know you're being compassionate when feel a little bit of someone else's sorrow or pain and try to engage them in a meaningful way. That might mean helping them grieve, or providing some sort of assistance, or listening to their story and offering to pray with them.

When you read the Gospels you can barely turn the page without encountering a story in which Jesus felt compassion for people and responded by healing the sick, encouraging the broken, and forgiving those who were ashamed of their past. As followers of Christ we inherit His ministry -- we must be kindhearted, we must be compassionate, and we must respond to the needs of others in considerate, meaningful, and often sacrificial ways.

(That's why the church has a compassion fund. That's why we're so passionate about growing our care ministries. We want to get alongside others as they struggle and do what we can to share that burden.)

Finally, Peter says we must be humble.

As followers of Christ we cannot be arrogant, prideful, boastful, or self-centered. Instead we freely declare our utter dependence on God and willingly surrender our status, power, and privilege in order serve others well.

Our culture doesn't regard humility as a particularly important character trait. We're often distracted by the loudest, most boastful voice in the room. We like to be the best, and we really like the attention and praise that comes when others recognize our hard-earned superiority.

But, the funny thing about the church is that it's not a gathering of the best of the best. It's a community of broken and bruised misfits who at some point in their lives caught a glimpse of the glory of God and from that point on...nothing else mattered. ***I don't need the world to think the world of me***, because my life has been forever changed by the grace of God, and I've been promised that His grace will continue to abound in the hearts of those who are joyously, foolishly, and freely humble.

Be like-minded, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, and be humble. We are all, without exception, commanded to pursue and cultivate this kind of character.

As we grow into this kind of a person and this kind of a community, we ***become better followers and better family***. Better followers of Christ because these are all Christ-like traits. Jesus is perfectly like-minded with the Father and the Spirit, sympathetic to our struggles, abounding in love, overwhelmingly compassionate, and so humble that he gave up his position in heaven in order to be a servant to you and to me. So the more we see this kind of character in our hearts, the more our hearts will look like Christ's.

And we become a better family because these traits bring us together, lead us to care for one another, and unite us as adopted sons and daughters of the living God.

So, a simple question for you this morning: if this is our standard...***how are we doing?***

Do you think there is evidence of these traits in your life, and in the life of our church?

Are you at peace with the people in your life group?

Is there a relationship with someone in this room that needs some repair?

Do you seek ways to serve one another?

Are you aware of the needs of the person sitting on your left or on your right?

Are you willing to trust this church family with your own needs? How are we doing?

And how, by the grace of God, might we do better? I promise you -- the church staff, pastors, directors, elders, and lay leaders want to know how we can be doing better. We want to listen. We would much rather know about disagreements and seek to address them than let the wounds they might cause go unattended.

Bottom line: our character matters. The kind of people we are is important to God, so it should be important to us too.

The reason character is so important is not only that it makes us better followers of Christ and a better church family, but also that it helps prepare us for the difficult work Peter says we've been called to in v. 9:

⁹ Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

Why is it so important for the church of Christ to be such a strong, supportive community? Because all of us, individually and as one body, are called to take on the incredibly hard task of actively and intentionally loving the people who do not love us.

This is one of our Savior's most revolutionary, world-changing, counter cultural teachings. We do not just love the people who love us. And we do not just avoid the people who hate us. We absorb the evil and insults that are thrown at us, and in return...we bless.

As followers of Jesus Christ we must sacrifice the right of retaliation and lay it at the foot of the cross.

To love an enemy means to act rightly toward them -- it does not necessarily mean that you feel a deep, emotional, Disney-like love for them. Blessing our adversaries has a lot more to do with resisting the temptation to fighting back against their evil with viciousness of our own.

When we bless our enemies we are breaking the cycle of evil that they have started. It may started with them but it will stop with us (or at least not be continued by us). This is a really hard thing to do, but it is one of the most powerful ways to share the life-changing Gospel with our enemies and with the world.

One of the most powerful examples of blessing one's enemy that I have ever seen occurred earlier this year when former Team USA gymnast Rachael Denhollander was given 40 minutes to speak to Larry Nassar, the man found guilty of abusing Rachael when she was 16 years old.

What Rachael chose to share with her abuser during that time is incredible. I don't know that I could honestly say that I would have had the same fortitude or faith. The entire address is hard to listen to and will break your heart and bring tears to your eyes.

I wish I could play the whole thing this morning, but I'll settle for this amended quote in which Rachael show us what it means to bless someone who has done unthinkable evil to us. As she addressed her abuser, she said:

In our early hearings you brought your Bible into the courtroom and you have spoken of praying for forgiveness. And so it is on that basis that I appeal to you. If you have read the Bible you carry, you know the definition of sacrificial love portrayed is of God himself loving so sacrificially that he gave up everything to pay a penalty for the sin he did not commit. By his grace, I, too, choose to love this way.

Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet. Because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found. And it will be there for you.

I pray you experience the soul crushing weight of guilt so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me—though I extend that to you as well.²

What Rachael did that day was brave and righteous and Christ-like. She took on the character of v. 8 and the calling of v. 9 and offered grace to a man who did not deserve it.

I want to make it clear that I am not saying all victims of abuse must find a way to do what Rachael did in the way she did it. It took her years to gather the strength to offer this response.

But we do need to be open to the ways God might ask us to bless and forgive those who have hurt us and remain committed to following Him even into doing things that seem impossible on our own. With God such things are possible, and in v. 9 we see not only the command to love our enemies, but also the promise that as we do these things we can expect to experience God's blessing for ourselves as well.

I need to be sure everyone hears this next part: Peter is not advocating for a system of works-based-righteousness. We do not earn the blessing of God. It is given as gift -- that's why Peter calls it an "inheritance." You inherit that which someone chooses to give you, but you can't inherit it if you're not around to receive it.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, the younger brother demands his inheritance then wastes it on worldly pleasures. When he decides to return home his plan is to work for his father in order to obtain what he needs. But it turns out his father will not stand for that -- instead, he welcomes the son back into his presence and restores him to the family and, once again, to a blessing of an inheritance. That's the kind of thing Peter is talking about here.

What we receive from God is a free gift simply for being his beloved sons and daughters. We didn't earn that. He gives it freely. God loves you, and He blesses you with gifts both temporal and eternal. In the presence of God there is fullness of joy. The love of Christ has brought you into a new birth, new life, a living hope, and an unending inheritance...so live like it. Be like-minded, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, and be humble. Bless those who curse you. That's the life we've been called.

In vv. 10-12 Peter supports his argument by quoting Psalm 34:12-16. He says

²<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/incredible-testimony-former-gymnast-confronts-sexual-abuser-court/>

¹⁰ *For,
"Whoever would love life
and see good days
must keep their tongue from evil
and their lips from deceitful speech.
¹¹ They must turn from evil and do good;
they must seek peace and pursue it.
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."*

Verse 10 illustrates what it means to be like-minded, sympathetic, loving, compassionate, and humble. It means keeping our tongues from evil, or lips from deceit, and in this day and age it means keeping our tweets civil and our facebook posts respectful.

People with Christian character don't delight in choosing sarcasm over sincerity or seeking to be right at the expense of being kind. Instead, they desire to be better followers of Christ and build a better family in the church and a better witness to the world through love.

Verse 11 defines what it means to bless those who curse us: turn from evil, do good, and pursue peace. Remember, we don't just avoid being mean. We actively seek to share the blessing of God with others.

Verse 12 talks about the blessings we receive -- the promise of the Lord watching over us, listening to our prayers, and securing what we need now and forevermore.

There's one more thing I want you to remember this morning. 1 Peter 3:8-12 gives us a lot to think about and a lot to do, and if we make the mistake of trying to do this on our own we are going to fail. Living in harmony with one another and loving our enemies is impossible if our model is anyone other than Jesus Christ. He's the only one who has ever done this perfectly, and he's the only one who can give us the strength to even get close to do this at all.

Love one another well, and share the love of God with those who do not love you back. This is who we're called to be and what we're called to do, by the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord.