

# Return Blessing for Evil

Over the years, whether I was doing research for a sermon, preparing to teach a class or trying to understand a



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person's expectations for our church, various ideas about the purpose or reasons for involvement in church surfaced. People voiced a need to be wanted, a church that provided sound doctrine in its teaching and preaching, a place to escape the noise and pressures of the world, a safe place for children, excitement in the music and sermons and a place where we will be with people like us. The list is longer, but you get the idea. We want to own the church, to organize, program and shape it as some sort of storm shelter where we can close and bar the door. That sounds harsh and most believers would not identify with those desires for the church. But the truth is our comfortable and defensive ideas about faith and the church are producing an impotent and declining church in America.

But there are hopeful signs in many places where believers are intentionally living out the grace of God in spite of society's hunger for success and ignorance of integrity. The Apostle Peter understood clearly what is required to live as a follower of Jesus in an often hostile world. In today's text he gives us a master list of requirements to live as a follower of Jesus:

- (1) be of one mind
- (2) be sympathetic
- (3) love other believers
- (4) be compassionate
- (5) have a modest opinion of yourself
- (6) don't respond to evil with evil
- (7) don't return insult for insult
- (8) bless others in spite of their attitudes
- (9) be zealous for good
- (10) don't be intimidated by critics
- (11) honor Christ as holy in your heart
- (12) be prepared to share and defend the hope of your faith
- (13) live humbly and respectfully
- (14) keep a clear conscience
- (15) be prepared to suffer for doing good

Peter reaches back to Psalm 34 to reinforce these ideas. This daunting text hits us between the eyes because

we are comfortable in our faith, we see our nation as Christian and we think ourselves better than the rest of the world. If we are to share Christ with our world, we must love God above all else and strive to live like the Savior who gave himself up for all of us.

Peter is calling us to be like Jesus, which is a tall order. This demanding text reminds me of Jesus challenging words in Matthew 5:21-48, where he teaches us to give our coat to the one who demands our shirt, to love our enemy and pray for anyone who persecutes us. The idea is to live beyond the selfishness and evil motivations of the world because we are different. There is no biblical text that assures us immunity from the circumstances of this world, no promised financial success and no power to call down fire on anyone who threatens us. We are to astound the world and turn it upside down by giving blessing to those who pour out evil and insult us (v. 9).

Whether we are behind closed doors or out in the world, as followers of Jesus we must live differently. We are to "shun evil and do good...seek peace and chase after it" (v. 11). This text is marked by action and purpose, not pacifism or resignation. Our energy is not shaped around pride or a hope for the day when others will get what they deserve. Our motivation is love and concern, the desire that all the world will come to know the love of God in Christ.

The previous lesson (1 Peter 2:11-24) dealt with the difficult idea of living a Christian witness within the often unjust worldly constraints of submission. Now we are told to be a faithful witness for Christ by repaying evil with good (v. 9). We are not to respond to the injustices and persecution of the world with insults or vengeance. Surely it is a miracle of God when we are able to confront hatred with love, injustice with compassion, and suffering with forgiveness. Peter adds additional purpose as he tells us to bless others so that we "might inherit a blessing" or find fulfillment in living by the example of Jesus (v. 9). He goes on to bolster his thinking by

## Formations

August 20, 2017

Scripture: 1 Peter 3:8-17

referencing Psalm 34:12-16, that when Christians control their tongues and choose good over evil responses we will "love life and see good days." We can become an expression of the same grace that opened our way to believe in God. We can break the cycle of selfishness and evil for evil.

Don't reduce what Peter is saying to the idea that if we love others they will rush to God. He is saying that our most persuasive argument against selfishness and flawed standards of the world will be seen more clearly if we live our faith consistently and love God, no matter our circumstances. Consider how Peter's concept of faith in God was not learned easily. He went from attempting to stand between Jesus and the cross when the authorities came to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane, to a submission that ultimately led to Peter's crucifixion in the early days of the church (John 18:1-27). The disciple behind today's text struggled and found the better way of following Christ and reaching out to the world. The history of the institutional church has been tragically marked by times when faith was forced by governments and armies, when missionaries forced people to adopt western thinking and social structures, when those primitive "savages" were remade in a western image. Our text presents a radical idea found throughout the New Testament and in the person of Jesus: we are to be compassionate, consistent and generous, no matter the powers or circumstances we face.

Like Jesus, we must be different, replacing hatred with love, anger with trust in God, judgment with forgiveness and despair with hope. We know God is with us and no power can erase his grace. We know through Christ our life is secure forever and that "It is better to suffer for doing good (if this could possibly be God's will) than for doing evil" (v. 17). Jesus has shown us the way and God's Spirit is with us.

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