

“A LIFE OF BLESSING AND HOLY FEAR”

I. INTRODUCTION

This passage marks a transition in this letter. Previously, Peter focused upon several specific relationships in which Christians need to keep their conduct honorable: the relationship between the Christian and the state; the relationship between slave and master; and the relationship between husband and wife. Now, he addresses all Christians, exhorting us to live a life that is a blessing to others and a life that is lived in the fear of God. These two qualities truly distinguish Christians from the people of this world. Your life as a Christian is not to be motivated by the same things that motivate the non-Christians around you. Instead of being focused only upon your own interests, the Lord calls you to consider the interests of others. And instead of being concerned with what other people think about you, the Lord calls you to be concerned with pleasing him. These are the two main points conveyed in this passage, and they are therefore the two main points of this sermon: the life to which we are called as Christians is a life of blessing and a life of holy fear.

II. LIVING TO BLESS OTHERS (vv. 8-12)

To be a Christian is to be a person who lives under the blessing of God. We are the heirs of what God promised to Abraham when he said, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” By God’s grace, he has extended his favor to us, granting us life and peace through the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf. And for this reason, we are the instruments through which God blesses others. As he said to Abraham, he blesses us in order that we might be a blessing to others.

In verse 8, Peter gives us a list of five qualities that characterize a life of blessing. We are called to have unity of mind, sharing the same faith and being unified in our submission to God’s truth. We are called to have sympathy, not focusing only upon our own needs but actively seeking the good of others and caring about their needs and concerns. We are called to live in brotherly love, remembering that our fellow Christians are also God’s children. We are called to have a tender heart towards others, extending mercy to the needs around us. And we are called to have a humble mind, remembering that pride is a cancer in the body of Christ. These five characteristics are necessary for the fostering of true friendship, fellowship, and love.

And Peter takes special care to point out that we are not to limit our kindness to those who are kind to us. On the contrary, he says that we are to be kind even to our enemies, not repaying evil for evil or reviling with reviling. This is reminiscent of Jesus’ teaching,

who said “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt. 5:44). It is also very similar to the teaching of the apostle Paul, who wrote “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them” (Rom. 12:14). Personal revenge, something that is so natural for us as fallen human beings, is forbidden to the Christian. It is our natural reflex to want to respond in kind whenever someone mistreats us, or is unkind to us, or ignores us. But our Lord calls us to return all the evil that others direct towards us with good. Not only are we forbidden from retaliation, but we are also commanded to respond to mistreatment by blessing those who mistreat us. To bless someone is to extend the favor of God to them. It means seeking not only their physical welfare, but their overall welfare, and especially their spiritual welfare. To bless someone is to seek the blessing of God on their behalf.

Why does our Lord require this of us? Why does he command us to bless those who persecute us? He does so because this is precisely how he has treated us. Christ died for us while we were still sinners, while we were living in rebellion against God. When we extend forgiveness and blessing to those who wrong us, we testify to the fact that we have received God’s blessing of forgiveness and eternal life.

As you know, there are a number of doctrines and practices over which Christians debate and disagree, but this is not one of them. The Bible makes it very clear that a Christian is called to a life of blessing. We are not to live solely for the pursuit of our own happiness.

Every Christian is called to serve others and to care for their needs. And this even extends towards those who are unkind to us. We are to repay evil with good, to respond to curses with blessings. There is no controversy over whether or not the Bible really teaches this. We know that it is true. And yet, how easily we settle into a self-centered way of life. How easily we allow ourselves to be consumed with our own problems, our own responsibilities, our own interests, and our own goals and desires. If we are honest, each and every one of us will admit that we overlook many opportunities to show Christian kindness to those around us, and especially towards those who are indifferent or unkind to us. Truly, this passage exposes our selfishness.

We must never forget that the heartbeat of the Christian life is love: having a profound and abiding sense of God's amazing love for us, and embracing that love by letting it be the guiding principle for how we conduct our lives. A truly Christian life is a life that is intent on loving other people in Christ's name, and this includes those who are inside the church as well as those who are outside of it. We are surrounded by opportunities to show Christian kindness. Husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, friends, co-workers, neighbors – all around us are people whom the Lord calls us to treat with sympathy and a tender heart. And not only that, but every unkind word, every instance of neglect, every selfish act, presents us with an opportunity to bless and not to curse. This is the life to which our Lord calls us. This is how he has treated us, and he calls us to pattern our lives after his example. The person who lives under God's

blessing, and who looks forward to future blessings in heaven, is a person who seeks out ways to be a blessing to others.

III. LIVING IN FEAR OF GOD (vv. 13-17)

After calling us to live to bless others, and especially to bless those who wrong us, Peter asks “Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?” In general, people do not seek to harm those who want to bless them. But even when this principle is not followed, even when non-Christians respond to the blessings of Christians with curses, they cannot do us any ultimate harm. God assures us that, even when we suffer for the sake of our devotion to Jesus Christ, he will bless us. Blessed are you when you are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.

And for this reason, we must not live our lives in fear of man, but in fear of God. In verses 14-15, Peter quotes from the passage we read earlier in the book of Isaiah (8:13-14). In their original context, those verses referred to the fact that Isaiah was not to fear the things that the unfaithful Israelites around him feared, but that he was to hold firmly to the Word of God. When the people around us stand opposed to what we believe, when they think less of us because of our faith in Jesus Christ, when we stand to lose something because of the faith we profess, at such moments we are tempted to live in fear of the people of this world. We are tempted to keep quiet about our faith, to lie

low, to maintain a low profile. This is what the Bible calls the fear of man. And the only antidote to this fear of man is the fear of the Lord. When we trust in what the Lord reveals to us in the Scriptures, when we remind ourselves that our God is the true ruler of this world, when we have a proper reverence for him, only then do we gain courage for life as God's pilgrim people in this world. When we set Jesus Christ above all other powers and authorities, then we are able to give a faithful response to those who stand opposed to us for what we believe.

There is one other thing that I want to point out about the verses that Peter cites from Isaiah 8. In Isaiah, the text reads "But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy." Notice what Peter does with this passage. He alters it ever so slightly, so that it says, "but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy." Do you see what he has done? He has taken an OT passage that referred to God and he has made it refer to Jesus Christ. There are a number of passages in the NT where we see the same thing. For example, we also see it in the opening verses of the Gospel of Mark, where Isaiah's words "prepare the way of the Lord" are used in reference to Jesus. The writers of these passages take OT texts that refer to God and make them refer to Jesus. In other words, such passages declare that Jesus is God. These are the kinds of texts that you want to point out if you ever have the opportunity to speak to a Jehovah's Witness. Jehovah's Witnesses claim that the NT does not really teach that Jesus is divine, but these passages prove beyond the shadow of

a doubt that their claim is wrong. The NT could not be more clear in affirming that Jesus Christ is indeed the very same God whom the Israelites of the OT worshipped.

Peter commands us to regard Christ the Lord as holy. When we have a proper fear of God, we can begin to see human opposition as an opportunity to bear witness to Christ. Instead of living in fear of opposition, we can look at the objections that people raise about our faith as occasions to share the gospel. Now, Peter is not saying that every Christian needs to be able to refute every single objection that non-Christians might raise about the Christian faith. Of course, it is good for us to study so that we can become better equipped to respond to various kinds objections. However, Peter's main point here is simply that every Christian, from the newest convert to the lifelong disciple, should be ready to give an account of his faith. We should all be able to tell others the reason for our hope.

Of course, this implies that we are living in such a way that people are prompted to ask about the reason for the hope that is within us. Ask yourself, is this true of me? Is my life causing people to be curious about why I am so hopeful? Do the people around me see that there is something different about me? Can they see that Jesus Christ has made a difference in my life? Is my life consumed by my own problems and concerns? Or, can the people around me see ways in which I am seeking to bless others? Am I a thankful person, or am I a grumbler? When others mistreat me, how do I respond to that

mistreatment? Am I afraid of death, or can people see that I have a hope that extends beyond the grave? Is my life different? The Christian life is not intended to be an ordinary life. It is not supposed to be a life that blends in with the crowd. If you belong to Jesus Christ, then your life should be extraordinary. It is not just the Mother Therasas of the world whom God calls to live such lives. He calls you and I to live extraordinary lives. He calls us to live as a blessing to other people – yes, and especially towards those who do not care one bit about us. This is not the way of the world. It stands out. The Christian life is to be an extraordinary life.

How can we live such a life? Not by our own effort. Not by our own strength. In verse 16, Peter says that our “good behavior” is done “in Christ.” Our union with Jesus Christ is the source of our new life. He is the vine; we are the branches. Apart from him, we can do nothing. In the words of Henry Scougal, “True religion is an union of the soul with God, a real participation of the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul, or in the Apostle’s phrase, it is Christ formed within us.” (Cited in John Stott, *Life in Christ*, 38) Christ is everything to the Christian. He is our source of blessing, through whom we receive power to bless others. He is the object of our fear and respect, through whom we receive confidence and courage to bear witness in the face of opposition. Christ is everything for us. Listen to the testimony of the Indian Christian Sundar Singh, who “was once asked by an agnostic professor of comparative religions in a Hindu College what he had found in Christianity which he had not found in his old religion. ‘I

have Christ,' he replied. 'Yes, I know,' said the professor a little impatiently, 'but what particular principle or doctrine have you found that you did not have before?' 'The particular thing I have found,' he replied, 'is Christ.'" (Stott, 8) Christ makes all the difference. Is he making that difference in your life? The life and vitality of the church depends upon that difference. The church needs its members, its men and women, its boys and girls, to live in Christ and to live for Christ. As Andrew Bonar wrote of Samuel Rutherford, "O for his insatiable desires Christward! O for ten such men in Scotland to stand in the gap! – men who all day long find nothing but Christ to rest in, whose very sleep is a pursuing after Christ in dreams, and who intensely desire to 'awake with His likeness.'" (*Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, 30)