

The Witness of Holy Suffering

1 Peter 3:8-12

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Have you ever heard a preacher say, “*In closing.*” and then not close? Sometimes when a preacher says that he does not mean he is concluding his whole sermon. He may mean he is wrapping up a point. This is actually what we have going on in vv. 8-12.

Peter has been addressing the holy conduct in the context of suffering. He started with a general call to holiness in chapter 1, v. 13, then moved to very specific relationships: government/human institutions, servants/masters, which we applied as employee/employer, and marriage: believing wives to unbelieving husbands and believing husbands to wives.

Now, we are at vv. 8-12, and he says, “*Finally,*” but he is not concluding his letter. He is only wrapping up his exhortation to the witness of holy conduct and submission in the midst of suffering and how it is a witness to unbelievers.

C. S. Lewis, in *The Problem of Pain*, says:

God whispers to us in our pleasures . . . but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. A bad man, happy, is a man without the least inkling that his actions . . . are not in accord with the laws of the universe . . . Until the evil man finds evil unmistakably present in his existence, in the form of pain, he is enclosed in illusion. Once pain has roused him, he knows that he is in some way or other ‘up against’ the real universe: he either rebels (with the possibility of a clearer issue and deeper repentance at some later stage) or else makes some attempt at an adjustment, which if pursued will lead him to religion.¹

Lewis is primarily addressing how God uses suffering to awaken us to faith in Christ. Yet, the subtle implication is that believers who are suffering with holy conduct are witnesses to an unbelieving world for Jesus. *We might say that our holy conduct in suffering is a holy witness to the power of the gospel.*

I. The Witness of Holy Conduct in Suffering (vv. 8-9)

Listen to vv. 8-9 again:

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.⁹ Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.

The English Standard Version (ESV) says, “*Finally,*” but the New American Standard translates it, “*To sum it all up.*” I think this is better. Peter was summing up his point: the call to holiness and the call to submit and suffer well.

Also, when Peter says, “*To sum it all up,*” he means he is keeping with his theme of suffering as a calling for the church. Notice what he said at the end of v. 9, “*for to this, you were called.*” We heard him say this in the first part of v. 21 in chapter 2. So, he is not introducing a new topic. Instead, he is driving home his point of praiseworthy conduct and suffering.

You might think that if you live a godly life that there would be no reason for anyone to cause you trouble or treat you unjustly. We often say to God, “*Lord, I have done everything according to your word, but I am being treated unfairly for it. What is the point of godliness if I am treated unjustly?*” Verses 13-14 help us here:

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics: The Problem of Pain*, 604-605.

Now, who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.

We always hope that if we live according to God's word and live a praiseworthy life that our culture will accept us and not trouble us as Christians. The fact is, if we live according to God's word, we will never quite fit into any human culture. We will always be sojourners and exiles. It was true in the first century, and it is true today. Never the less, even if we are treated unjustly for righteousness, that does not mean we may relax our obedience to God's word.

So, in light of our calling as Christians, Peter gives us five graces that will hopefully enable any church and small group to flourish in any cultural climate in any age. These graces are the result of being born-again by the Holy Spirit.

The first grace in v. 8 is "*unity of mind*." The New American Standard translates this Greek word *harmonious*, but the ESV gets it right with the phrase *unity of mind*, or the earlier ESV translates it *be of one mind*.

Notice it says *unity of mind* not unity of *socio-economic status*, nor unity of *ethnicity or unity of race*, nor unity of *political affiliation or personal convictions*, nor unity of *likes or interests*, and not *unity of age*. These things are not bad, but they are not the reason a church is unified, nor are they issues around which a church should unify.

One of the problems of the American church is that too many churches are uniting around age, sociological issues, preferences, and programs and not a commitment to doctrine, theology, and robust application of the gospel.

Remember what, what a church wins people with is how they will keep them. If *church UNITES around creative ministry programs, a style of performance music* (commonly called worship), and *preaching that is propped up with video and art*, then what will happen when that is taken away?

A. W. Tozer called the church age in which we currently live, the age of entertainment in church.² If a church wins people being driven by these strategies, then they may not have won them to Jesus but instead won them to their strategy. Unity around a strategy is not biblical unity of mind. Many people think *bait and switch method of church growth is valid evangelism*. In reality, this method of church growth is divisive.

Just in case you are WONDERING, I am not referring to any churches in Ames. Though there may be churches in Ames that do these things, I am not referring to them. I am actually referring to churches I have been a part of in my years of ministry. I learned the hard way.

However, don't hear what I am not saying. I am not saying a church cannot have creative ministry or excellent music in a worship service. I am saying that if a church unites around these strategies and is driven by them, it will create misplaced unity. *These methods do not create biblical unity of mind but, in the long run, are divisive*.

Some churches unite around preaching. Many churches and preachers today, in a desire to preach to large crowds and have lots of podcast followers, are trading in biblical faithfulness for creativeness, cutting-edge media, or sermons filled with comedy and light-hearted pick me ups. In order to achieve their goal, they must abandon expositional preaching of God's word. It is possible to gather a large group around this kind of preaching and preacher, but I would not call it *biblical unity of mind*.

The fact is, this kind of preaching reveals a low view of the word of God and of the power of the gospel to change lives. This kind of preaching, coupled with a desire to draw a large crowd, is deadly and an abomination.

So, what does Peter mean when he calls us to *unity of mind*? He is calling us to unite around the gospel and be committed to *solid doctrine and theology*. If the gospel drives us and the Lord gives us creativity, then *praise God*. If we are driven by the word of God, and God blesses us with excellent musicians, then praise God.

² A.W. Tozer, *Tozer on Worship and Entertainment*, compiled by James L. Snyder.

I used to be on staff at a church where the senior pastor said, *“People do not come for the preaching. They come for the music.”* There were some faithful saints in that church that were starved for God’s word. Perhaps you have been a part of a church like that.

There are many churches whose *unity of mind* is driven by unity of music and unity of programs and nothing more. Unity around these things will not sustain a church when suffering hits. It will not sustain a church when a pandemic hits. COVID may kill more than people; it may kill churches that have united around anything other than the gospel of Jesus Christ. A church not united around God’s word will not stand. However, a church united around God’s word will be a strong witness when suffering comes.

Here at Grand, we strive to be united around the gospel and also the preaching of the full counsel of God. One of the ways we strive to stay focused on the gospel is to walk through the gospel every Sunday. We need to be constantly reminded of the holiness of God and our sin against Him. We need to be reminded of the gospel and the work that Jesus did to save us sinners. We need to be reminded to be thankful for our salvation and praise God for it. We need to hear the full counsel of God’s word preached every Sunday. We need to sing songs that have the gospel in them. These songs help keep our hearts anchored to the cross.

We need a statement of faith that allows us to unite around the essentials but does not get off in the weeds of secondary issues. For example, our statement of faith is clear that Jesus will return in bodily form and take His people home with Him. It does not, however, tell us what end-time position to hold. Case in point, Pastor Eric and I do not hold to the same end-time view, and that does not matter. We hold very tightly to the unabridged gospel of Jesus Christ and many other important doctrinal positions like the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of salvation and the doctrine of the church, etc.

Unity of mind does not mean we have to all agree on everything, but it does mean we agree on the fundamentals of the gospel and historical orthodox doctrine. It also means we need to agree to be committed to one another as members of a local church. *Unity of mind* means that in a local church, we have committed our lives to one another to do life together in the larger body and small groups.

The beauty of being a church and small group where you have *unity of mind* around the gospel means you are committed to one another. *When this happens, the beauty of the gospel shines forth along age and ethnic lines. We see how we are one in Christ, and it does not matter what our preferences are, where we are from, how old we are, and any other deficiencies or proficiencies we have.*

The gospel has given us oneness in Christ. As R.C. Sproul says, *“Like-mindedness has come by submission to God’s word . . . [it] is something we should cultivate and guard jealously in the church, lest we allow petty matters to destroy the unity of the body of Christ.”*³

Unity of mind is fragile in these days of coronavirus and COVID-19. People can get very passionate about their views and positions. Everyone cites an expert and knows someone who knows someone who said *such and such*. Many of us have strong opinions about masks, gloves, hand sanitizers, and social distancing. I understand these positions and concerns. However, let’s not allow these things to divide us when we do not know the full outcome yet.

Let’s strive for unity as we wade through this season of uncertainty and perhaps even a few years of uncertainty. Our unity of mind around the gospel during a divisive season in our culture will be a witness of the power of the gospel.

One of the ways we will achieve unity is to overflow with a spirit of *sympathy* for one another. This is the second grace that Peter calls us to practice.

The word sympathy in this text is more like compassion. It does not mean to feel sorry for one another but to come alongside someone and feel their pain with them.

³ R.C. Sproul, *1-2 Peter: An Expository Commentary*, 83.

We often jokingly say, “*I feel your pain.*” In reality, we do not feel their pain, but we mean we have *had the same experience*. This Greek word *sympathy* is deeper than having the same experience. This is sympathy and compassion that goes deep in the heart.

This kind of sympathy rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep. This kind of sympathy is one *that* moves you to action. Pushes you to show your care and concern.

This kind of sympathy is difficult in our pandemic context. You cannot just show up at a sick friend’s house and have prayer with them. You cannot easily go to the hospital when a baby is born or attend a funeral for a friend or loved one. We have to learn new ways to show sympathy and compassion.

We must find new ways to be compassionate. Emails and text messages can be useful but may fall short. Don’t rely solely on these means of communication. Make phone calls to people, pray over the phone, send handwritten letters, and make video calls.

Next, Peter calls for brotherly love. This is the Greek word *philadelphos*. The Holy Spirit creates *brotherly love* in us when we have been born again. We have been born into a new family called the church. Family is the primary metaphor for the church in the New Testament.

I know thinking of church as your family might create some concern since some of us may have grown up in dysfunctional families. Most of us have experienced the brokenness of families to some degree. Families, even Christian families, are filled with sinners.

Whatever your horror story is of your biological family or perhaps even a horrible experience in a church family, you need to know that Christ loves you, and He is creating a new family.

We must be careful to NOT view God’s family through the lens of our broken family. This can be a struggle. It can make us reserved, overly cautious, slow to trust, guarded, and even jaded at times.

Here is what we need to know. Our growth in loving others is a process much like sanctification. We are born again, and from that new birth, we start our new life right there and begin to take baby steps forward. Sometimes we stumble, sometimes we struggle, but *brotherly love, compassion, and unity help us to help one another. A godly church family in exile helps one get back up and continue on our journey toward heaven.*

A tender heart will help us help others who are struggling. The word picture for *tender-hearted* is the picture of feeling something deep in your gut. Have you ever had your guts churn when you get a piece of bad news or excitement when you get good news? This is kind of like what *tender-hearted* means.

The heart is the seat of the emotions, and so to be *tender-hearted* is to have love, compassion, and kindness overflowing from your heart. Think of it this way, although Jesus was firm and direct with the unrepentant Pharisees and Sadducees, He was tender-hearted with sinners of low estate like prostitutes and tax collectors.

Jesus is our Savior who will not extinguish a smoldering wick or discard a broken and bruised reed. He came to seek and save the lost, and those who come to Him find mercy, grace, and forgiveness.

Tender heartedness is Jesus forgiving the sins of the paralyzed man who had been lowered through the roof. *Tender heartedness* is Jesus weeping at Lazarus’ tomb and then raising him from the dead. *Tender heartedness* is Jesus touching lepers, sharing the gospel with the woman at the well, eating with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes. *Tender heartedness* gets in the mud and mire of life with people. Who and where in your life do you need to show the *tender-heartedness* of Christ?

The last grace is a *humble mind*. The phrase *humble mind* also means *lowliness of mind*. It is NOT a call to be simple-minded. Nor is it a call to think less of yourself. It is a call to think of yourself less and think of the needs of others first.

Jesus Christ, our Savior, is the only person who has ever modeled these graces perfectly. The Bible calls Jesus gentle, lowly, and humble in heart. He modeled these graces perfectly. Jesus put the needs of sinners before his own so and this led Him to give His life as our ransom on the cross. He took our shame on that old rugged cross so that we may repent of our sin and be born again with His life in us.

Finally, in v. 9, Peter applies these graces in the context of struggle, suffering, and trial when he says:

“Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.”

Our calling as Christians is not to retaliate against those who persecute us. However, we are not simply stoic in our suffering but instead repaying suffering with a blessing. The power of the gospel turns our response to injustice and persecution upside down and inside out.

To sum it all up, think about our witness of holy conduct in holy suffering in the context of the coronavirus and COVID-19. You might not be worried about COVID. You might be going on with life as normal while you have friends or family members that are more cautious, and some are perhaps even fearful.

These five graces will help us navigate this situation. You might not agree on how to be safe or how to carry out social distancing. It might be a conversation that usually disintegrates into careless words and even harsh words. Instead of responding in kind, how about remembering that we are in the same family. How about remembering that we all belong to Jesus because of what Jesus has done for us. Let the person and work of Christ that put us in the same family remind us to practice sympathy and brotherly love for one another. The gospel should cause us to be humble toward one another no matter what our position is on COVID.

So, while we may not agree on social distancing and masks or whatever, we can have *unity of mind* that it was Jesus' blood shed on the cross that purified us and saved from our sin, not through a vaccine or convalescent plasma antibodies.

Let's bless instead of curse and strive for these five graces in our lives right now and until Jesus returns.

II. The Power Source for a Holy Witness of the Gospel (vv. 10-12; 2:21-25)

*For, “Whoever desires to love life and see good days,
let him keep his tongue from evil
and his lips from speaking deceit;*

¹¹ let him turn away from evil and do good;

let him seek peace and pursue it.

*¹² 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 those who do evil.”

Verses 10-12 are a quote of Psalm 34:12-16. They are an Old Testament summary of the summary Peter just gave in vv. 8-9. Peter truly is a preacher because he has just closed a second time.

When you read vv. 10-12, it sounds like you earn your salvation by works. It sounds like that if you do all of these things will work out, and you will be blessed with eternal life. This is not what Peter means.

There is only one man who has ever kept vv. 8-12 perfectly and that is Jesus Christ. Jesus is our Example and Perfecter of our faith. He is the One who kept vv. 8-12 for us and purchased power that is given by the Holy Spirit to live out these verses and repent when we sinfully disobey these verses.

Look back to 1 Peter 2:21-25 and hear how Jesus fulfilled these verses for us. Jesus lived these verses and then paid for our sin of failing to live these verses.

Notice at how v. 21 begins, *“For to this you were called because Christ also suffered . . .”* It was Jesus' calling, and now it is ours. Listen to vv. 21-25:

For to this, you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Everything Peter is calling us to do has been done by Jesus already. We are called to look at our Forerunner, who is the Author and Perfecter of our faith. He is our example, but He is more than an example. He is also our sacrifice who purchased "Holy Spirit" power to follow Him.

If Jesus were only our example, we would be hopeless and given to despair. But it is not hopeless, and we are not in despair. Although there is no way, we can follow His example perfectly. We are called to follow His example and practice the repentance Jesus purchased when we sin.

Jesus Christ is the very Son of God, who never sinned. He never had a sinful thought. He never reviled those who killed Him. He never threatened. He always trusted Himself into the hands of His Father, The Great Shepherd, and Overseer of His soul so that when we endure similar sufferings, we have Holy Spirit power to not retaliate but trust ourselves into the hands of our Shepherd and Overseer of our souls.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, we can be a blessing because there is a blessing coming for God's people. This is what the end of v. 9 reminds us. We can be a blessing because, on the last day, Jesus will give us our blessing of eternal life with Him. Also, He will settle all accounts and make all things right. He will administer justice and righteousness in the end.

We may suffer on this earth, but when we stand before His Throne of Grace, He will give justice to His elect. So, brothers and sisters, let's suffer well in this life and as a church. It is our witness to an unbelieving world. Remember how we treat one another is also a witness to one another. Jesus, just before He went to the cross, prayed for to His disciples and for us in John 17:14-21:

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.