*The Basics of Christian Behavior*

1 Peter 3:8-12

3/5/23

 For the last month, our study of 1 Peter has focused on how the gospel transforms specific relationships. We have considered our relationship to the government, a slave’s relationship with their master, and the husband-wife dynamic. We still have our relational dynamic with the world (3:13-17), with other believers (4:7-11), and with church leadership (5:1-5) to consider. Between these sections Peter gives general exhortations on Christian conduct and grounds these action in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our text today is one of these bridge texts focused on general Christian conduct.

 We have looked at two foundational commands in 1 Peter. The first was *like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves in all your behavior because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”* (1:15-16).The second came in 2:12, where we were told to *keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evil doers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.* The underlying principle of both commands is that Jesus’ redemptive work did more than provide forgiveness for our sins. It also broke the power of sin in our lives, enabling us to live for God. But doing that requires us to engage in the process.

 The phrase *to sum up* draws us back to these foundational commands, reminding us that our modified behavior stems from the transforming work of Christ. The fact that we have been born again to a living hope (1:3) is what compels us to a life of holiness. This summary is grounded in the principle of being elect exiles in the world. The text carries that theme forward by identifying characteristics we should cultivate, actions we should avoid, and the reason for our efforts. The driving force behind all of this is that we would draw near to God.

 First, there are characteristics we are to cultivate. Before we look at the qualities listed, notice three things. First, these qualities apply to all Christians. We see that in the phrase *all of you*. Peter’s teaching for slaves and spouses may be limited to those who experience those relationships, but what he is about to teach applies to every believer.

Second, these characteristics focus on attitudes not actions. We live in a results-based society. We regularly look for performance metrics to measure success by. But the Christian life is measured, not by performance, but by the inner working of our hearts. Peter is not calling us to do religious activities, but to demonstrate a growing godliness flowing from within.

 Finally, notice the communal focus. None of these qualities can be expressed in isolation. The local church is the place where these qualities are expressed. When a congregation owns these principles, the life-transforming power of the gospel will be beautifully displayed.

 With that in mind, let us survey the five characteristics Peter says we should cultivate. The first in the list is *harmonious*. This word focuses on being like-minded. This does not mean that there is to be no diversity of thought in the church. Uniformity is not the same thing unity. It means our common love for God, salvation in Christ, commitment to Scripture, and desire to be faithful in the world causes us to think and act as a group. It causes us to protect the unity and reputation of the church and of the individuals who make it up. When differences arise (for they inevitably will), we seek to maintain unity by considering the viewpoints of others, extending grace, and being patient. Unity does not spring out of a hole in the ground. It must be pursued, cultivated, and protected. Being harmonious means we have the capacity to separate preference from principle, and foundational truth from secondary issues.

 Second, we are to be sympathetic. Harmony speaks to the unity of our minds. Sympathy speaks to the unity of our affections. It means that you seek to grasp someone else’s perspective, to feel what they feel, to understand what they are going through. Scripture calls us to rejoice with those who rejoice, and to weep with those who weep. Doing so is mechanical unless we learn to feel the experience of others. What drives this in the church is our common affection for Christ, which is the basis of our sympathy towards one another.

 Third, we are to be brotherly. This word points to the natural affections between siblings. In a normal family dynamic, siblings have a natural affinity towards and loyalty to one another. The same should be true of the household of God. Through Christ, we have been adopted as children of God. As such, we are to cultivate a familial love for one another. As every parent knows, this comes easy to some sibling relationships, while it takes much more work in others. Yet regardless of the ease or difficulty of it, the standard remains the same: we must express brotherly love to one another.

 Fourth, we are to be kindhearted. The word literally means *with healthy bowels.* In the west, the *heart* is used to describe the center of a person. It is the real them, the place where the spirit resides. But in some places of the world, the bowels have this descriptive function. What Peter means by all of us being *with healthy bowels* is not that we maintain a healthy diet. He means that we are to cultivate a healthy heart disposition towards one another. A good synonym for this word would be compassion. Compassion wants to help others when they struggle. We all struggle in various times and ways. Being kindhearted causes us to look for needs so we can minister God’s grace into one another’s lives in a spirit of gentleness.

 Finally, we are to be humble in spirit. Humility is thinking rightly about yourself. A humble person does not have a bloated view of themselves, their gifting, capacities, or influence. Rather than promoting themselves, a humble spirit highlights the success of others. Ultimately, they want people to see is the greatness and glory of God. Having a humble spirit permeates all of life and produces an attitude of thanksgiving and gratitude.

 Vs. 8 calls us to cultivate characteristics that produce a loving, unified, gospel-rich church life. As we progress into vs. 9, we see two actions we are to avoid because they destroy unity and undermine our character. These actions are closely related yet distinct from each other.

 The first action we are to avoid is returning evil for evil. When we are wronged, our feel justified in retaliating. It is not uncommon in a household of four boys for me to hear *dad…so and so hit me!* I have learned to ask *why*? I do not ask that question because I think the use of force was justified. Experience has taught me that the hit was probably instigated by some lesser offense. I have two issues to correct, not one. The one who did the hitting usually thinks it was justified because of their brother’s perceived unjust action. Yet an evil action never justifies an evil response. There is no situation where two wrongs ever make a right in God’s sight.

 The second action we are to avoid is closely related. We are not to return insult for insult. The previous prohibition speaks to our actions. This one addresses our words. At the core, they are the same problem. Someone says something that offends us, so we respond by cutting them down to size with a cruel comment of our own. Before long, we are engaged in a verbal boxing match. How many simple disagreements become bitter feuds because of a barbed comment, turning the conversation from trying to gain like-mindedness to exchanging insults. Such things have no place in the community of God’s people.

 Instead of returning evil for evil or insult for insult, we are to give a blessing. I wonder if Peter had Jesus’ words in mind as he wrote this. Jesus said *love you enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you* (Lk. 6:27ff.). Pr. 22:21-22 says *If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will also reward you.* We are not to respond to sin in kind. Instead, we are to respond in a way that pleases God. Proverbs 15:1 says *a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.* Our response to mistreatment should be to do what makes for peace. *As much as possible, as far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men* (Ro. 12:18). *Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned as it were with salt, so that you may know how to respond to each person* (Co. 4:5). Jesus set the example of what this looks like when He asked God to forgive His executioners, because they did not know what they were doing. When we respond to mistreatment like that, we will be known to be God’s children.

 A gracious response bring a blessing from God. Scripture is clear that God rewards His people for doing what is right. But that blessing is inherited *in the future* at the judgment seat of God. In the same way a wise young person begins to prepare for life after work, a wise Christian conducts the few years they have on this earth with an eye towards their eternal home in heaven. They live today for that day, knowing that God will amply reward them.

 So in vs. 8-9 we find qualities we are to cultivate and actions we are to avoid. But *why?* Peter turns to his OT to answer that question, quoting Ps. 34:12-16. The Christian’s desire is to experience intimacy and unbroken fellowship with God. That desire compels us to display God’s glory in everything we do and enjoy Him for the greatness that He is.

 If we want to experience abundance of life in Christ, described in vs. 10 as desiring life, to love and see good days, then we must engage in that process in two ways. First, we must rid ourselves of sin. The one who desires fellowship with God must *keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit. He must turn away from evil.* God has no fellowship with sin, for sin violates His very nature. Because the believer wants to draw near to God, they seek to eliminate sin from their lives. We do not do this because we are trying to earn God’s favor. His favor comes to us through the undeserved salvation of Jesus Christ. Instead, we are to be like a husband, who discovers that something he does is distasteful to his wife, so he seeks to eliminate that annoyance from his behavior. He does because he loves his wife and wants to please her. Since sin is offensive to God, believers seek to eliminate it from their lives so they can enjoy unhindered fellowship with Him.

 This leads into the second way we engage in the process of experiencing abundant life in Christ. Vs. 11 says that we are to turn away from evil *and do good; he must seek peace and pursuit.* In other words, we are to replace the sinful desires of our former life with the actions, attitudes, and desires that please God. Again, marriage helps us understand the goal here. Think of a wife who discovers that her husband really likes a particular food. Although she has never cooked it before, and it doesn’t appeal to her, she learns to make it as an expression of love towards her husband. She does it for the pure joy of pleasing her husband. Likewise, the believer’s response to God’s kindness is to learn to do the things that please Him. That is what motivates doing good and seeking peace.

 The driving force in all of this is the desire for fellowship with God. God’s eye is toward the righteous. He favors those who seek to display His holiness. And His ears attend to their prayers, meaning He answers them. We saw this last week when Peter told husbands that their was a connection between their faithfulness as husbands and experiencing fellowship with God through prayer. God draws near to those who draw near to Him. He delights to meet us in the private prayer closet, to minister His grace to the lowly in spirit, and to use us to bear much fruit as we abide in Christ.

 Yet God’s face is against those who do evil. We know this to be true of God’s enemies. But this is also a warning here for believers. The persistent pursuit of sin brings discipline. God will by no means leave the guilty unpunished (Ex. 34:7). He takes sin very seriously. Just ask Ananias and Sapphira, who were killed by God in Acts 5 for deceiving the church over the extent of their generosity. Or ask the believers we read about in 1 Cor. 11 who died because they took communion *in an unworthy manner*. Sin clogs the spring of God’s grace in our lives, hindering the freedom of its flow. Sin cannot remove salvation from us, but it does create distance in our relationship with God. This is why the bible often describes the believer’s struggle with sin in warfare terms. We wage this war because we want to experience as much of the power and presence of God as we can right now. There is no need to wait for eternity to experience these things. Jesus came that we might have life *now*, and to have it abundantly.

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I leave you with a simple question to ponder today. Are you cultivating the kind of qualities that show you are a child of God? Or are your actions distancing you from God? *This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome* (1 Jn. 5:3).

*Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be glory, both now and to the day of eternity.*