October 21/22, 2017

How to Love Life and See Good Days

Hope Filled Living in a Culture of Despair

1 Peter 3:8-12

Pastor Bryan Clark

I am a firm believer that you have to own your own story. Life is precious; life is short. You don't get two chances, so you have to own your own story. I'm very aware of the fact that there is little I can do to change the culture. I'm absolutely convinced I cannot control the people around me. The only person in the equation I can control is me, and I have to own the fact I am responsible for my own life. I'm responsible for my attitudes; I'm responsible for my perspectives; I'm responsible for my choices; I'm responsible for my behaviors. It's my life; I own it—which then raises the question of the morning: How, in a culture of despair, do we still love life and find good?

That's what we want to talk about today, but I'll tell you right up front, the answer is probably not what you think. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Peter, Chapter 3. If you're visiting with us, we've been working our way through 1 Peter. We find ourselves in chapter 3. Starting in verse 8, he says:

> **To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.**
>
> (*NASB, 1 Peter 3:8-9)

So he opens the paragraph by saying, *"This is a summary of where we've been."* We go back to the reminder that we have been radically changed on the basis of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Christianity is not a *try-harder* religion. It's based on the fact that on the basis of the grace and mercy of God, we have been radically changed—and so this new life flows out of this transformation that has taken place. We're told that *we are the people of God*; we are *God's own possession*. But with that wonderful truth comes responsibility. We have been called, and we have been called *to proclaim the excellencies of the One who has transferred us out of darkness into His marvelous light.* How do we do that? We do that by abstaining from fleshly lusts. Basically, as long as we are tied up with our own sin, that's all we think about; that's all we focus on. Sin makes us selfish. That's kind of like "Step one". "Step two" is, then, we make our behavior—and therefore our message—attractive to an unbelieving world by *doing good works*.

Peter has reminded us again and again it's not enough just to have words. There must be something in our behavior that demonstrates we have been radically changed. He's talked about what that looks like as citizens, what that looks like in unfair relationships, what that looks like at home, and now we summarize it with a series of commands.

To sum up, all of you be harmonious... The word literally means *to be united around a mission.* If you think of the word harmony, our English word flows out of this Greek word. You think of the melody line, and that's kind of the driving mission; and then all of the harmony is built around that; that's kind of the concept. So you can think in terms that make sense to you, whether you're talking about an orchestra, you're talking about an athletic team, you're talking about the military, or you are talking about different people, different personalities, different stories, or different backgrounds. But ultimately, we lay our differences aside in order to unite around the common mission. That's kind of the heartbeat of this term.

All of us are aware there's a lot of concern and struggle in all the division that seems to characterize our culture today. I would suggest to you there has not been a compelling mission for who we are as Americans, for decades. We are a collection of individuals—individualism that is selfish. This self-centered attitude has become almost a virtue in our culture. There is no driving mission that causes us to lay down differences and come together. Consequently, we're nothing more than a collection of individuals, and what we see is only going to get worse until that changes. But we remind ourselves this morning that we're not just the culture. By the grace and mercy of God, we are *the people of God*, and we do have a uniting mission. We do have a sense of purpose that drives and defines us—that we lay aside our differences and we come together to accomplish the mission. That's the idea of **harmonious**.

Sympathetic is pretty much what we would think of it. It's kind of this *caring connection with people's feelings*. The Greek word includes both joys and sorrows. *We weep with those who weep, and we rejoice with those who rejoice,* but we come together and experience those emotions together.

Brotherly is a term that has less and less meaning for us as our families become more and more fractured and dysfunctional. But maybe the terminology that would recapture it is this idea of a *band of brothers.* This military idea where we are on a mission; we are different people from different backgrounds, but we come together as a band of brothers to accomplish the mission. The idea is that we are family. We all have relationships that get strained and are difficult, and a lot of those we just let go. It isn't worth the energy to try to sort it out. But it's different when it's family. We will expend a lot of energy and time to somehow face into it, work through it, and somehow make progress, because there's this sense that this is different—we're family! That's the idea of **brotherly**. There is this reminder that we are united together as *the people of God.* I reminded us several weeks ago that the church is made up of people, and people genuinely are all odd and awkward and different. We're all kind of weird in our own ways. But there is the sense in which, "...but we are *the people of God*. We work through that and we come together to accomplish the mission." It's a high level of commitment in order to come together.

Kindhearted is just what you would think of; we might use the word compassion—just the *genuine caring spirit for one another*—**and humble in spirit**. The Greek word really reflects *thinking of others as more important than yourself.* It's good to remind ourselves whenever we see the concept of humility in the New Testament that this was contrary to the value system in a Greco-Roman culture. They did not see humility as a virtue. They actually saw it as a weakness. It was all about *me* and *my* strength, and whatever *I* needed to get done. So whenever you see this concept of humility, it was really dramatically contrary to the prevailing culture. But this whole attitude that was in Jesus should be reflected in His people—that we put others first, reflecting the life change we have in Christ.

So think of verse eight and these commands, which are kind of summing up the discussion that we've had as life within the family of God. The basic idea is that it creates a place of refuge. It's a place where we can go where we are *aliens and strangers together*, so that we have some sort of a place of refuge where we can grow, where we can heal, where we can gain strength in order to go *out there*—and it's not going to be that way *out there*. So the idea is: if we can't pull it together in here, we're never going to be faithful *out there.*

So verse nine moves out to the broader culture **...not returning evil for evil or insult for insult.** Whether you're talking about verbally or talking about social media, it's kind of a new response... *that we don't return evil for evil; we don't return insult for insult.* We were told by Peter that when

Jesus was verbally abused...reviled...*He did not revile in return*. The text is not a "hunker down and take it" text. It's actually proactive. We do something in return. We give a **blessing**. Literally the word means *to speak well of someone* **...giving a blessing instead**; **for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing**. We were blessed in order to be a blessing.

Our first reaction would be, "That doesn't seem fair. If people insult us, in return we offer a blessing?" But if you remember two weeks ago, I offered a newsflash. "Newsflash: Life isn't fair!" The text tells us we should expect to be slandered. We should expect to be treated unfairly. Peter reminded us, "That's the story of Jesus!" It wasn't fair that Jesus took our sins upon Himself on the cross. It wasn't fair that Jesus died in our place. We as *the people of God* are the last people that should be talking about fairness—but Peter says, "That is the pattern; that's the example that we're to follow." So as people slander us, as people insult us, as people are unfair to us, we don't just hunker down and take it; we actually proactively respond by offering some sort of a **blessing**.

Now this is really important to think about. I think sometimes it gets in the heads of Christians that in order to be faithful, in order to take our stand as *the people of God*, we must fight back. You see a lot of this on social media. There is this idea that we somehow have to fight back and take back the country. "That's what it means to be a Christian," and, "That's what it means to be strong," and, "That's what it means to be faithful to our calling." We tend to think because our words are biblical, our words are true, because our words are meaningful to us, therefore those words will be convincing, and people will hear them, people will read them, and in this moment of clarity they will say, *"You know, you're right! I'm wrong! Hallelujah, my life has been changed!"*

But here's what is actually happening. We live in a very angry culture. The anger is for several reasons, but people are angry, people are hostile, people are frustrated, people are fearful, and it comes out in really destructive ways. When we enter into that and we respond in kind, people are not sorting out the argument and the words we are using. They just perceive us to be another angry demographic, just like everyone else.

It's helpful to understand that the people that agree with you will applaud you. The people that disagree are just made angry. But, at the end of the day, you're not changing the world. What Peter is saying is what's going to cause us as *the people of God* to be distinct, is that our behavior is so *other than* what is so common in our culture, people will have to back up and say, *"What is the deal with these people that are so radically different?"* Think about it: In a culture of such anger and hostility and intolerance, if rather than responding in kind, we responded with a blessing, we responded in a way that is so unlike the rest of the culture, it would cause people to stop and wonder, *"Who are these people? And what makes them act like that?"*

The commands in verses eight and nine are really meant to be the strategy to accomplish that. Our calling is "*to proclaim the excellencies of Him who has transferred us out of darkness into light."* Our behavior must reflect that rather audacious claim.

In verse ten you see the word **for**. Now this is the Greek word *gar*, G-A-R in English. We refer to this as an *explanatory gar.* Now I know you're thrilled to know that—you probably want to write that down. *(laughter)* But it actually is an important point because an explanatory gar is basically saying what follows is the theological foundation, the rationale, that supports why we should obey verses eight and nine—and it's essentially a quote from Psalm 34.

So before we read the words of Psalm 34, I want to remind us of a couple of things. First of all, Psalm 34 was written by David. It was written by David while he was in the *Wilderness School of Leadership*. If you were with us during the Samuel series, you should have a pretty good idea of what we're talking about. It was written when David, as a teenage boy, trusted God and took on the giant Goliath, and toppled him to the ground. It was a great moment in Israel's history. It set them free from the Philistines. David continued to trust God and God did amazing things through young, teenage David. But Saul was so threatened by David, Saul determined he must kill David before David takes over the kingdom. So David, after being faithful to God, is rewarded by having to flee as a fugitive and live in the wilderness, running for his life for more than a decade. It must have been a time of great hurt, a time of great confusion, a time of wondering, "Where's God in all of this?" You just tried to do the right thing and this is what you get in return?

Specifically, Psalm 34 was written when David made some bad decisions and ended up in the presence of the Philistine king, Abimelech. David was fearful that Abimelech would kill him, having heard the stories of David as a warrior, so David pretended to be mentally insane. As a result of that, Abimelech was convinced David had lost his mind and tossed him out. It was out of that experience that David writes these words. So before you are tempted to say, "Well, you don't know *my* circumstances; you don't know *my* story; you don't know why this wouldn't work for *me*," let's remember that David is saying, "In the midst of those circumstances, it was possible *to love life and to see good days."*

Let's also remind ourselves that the first readers were those who had been driven out of their homeland because of persecution. They had ended up in northern Turkey as *aliens and strangers,* foreigners with few rights and privileges, beginning to go through persecution, but that persecution was about to increase dramatically! Even Peter, who writes these words, would soon be put to death by Nero. So we remind ourselves before we say, "But you don't know *my* circumstances; you don't know why this wouldn't be fair for *me*," let's remember the context of the people for whom this is being written, and they are being told, "In the midst of your circumstances, you can *love life and see good days.*" So with that in mind, we read,

> **"THE ONE WHO DESIRES LIFE, TO LOVE AND SEE GOOD DAYS,**
> **MUST KEEP HIS TONGUE FROM EVIL AND HIS LIPS FROM SPEAKING DECEIT. (Vs. 10)**

So David in Psalm 34 is saying, "If you want to, regardless of your circumstances, *love life and see good days*, here's how you do it." There are two parts to this. The first part is in the second half of verse ten. Bluntly stated, *"You must control your mouth*." It's interesting how much the Scriptures emphasize the importance of this. He says, **"You must keep your tongue from evil**." That word **keep** is a Greek word used to describe a bridle on a horse. Kind of get the imagery in your head of a horse that is beginning to get out of control, and the rider is pulling on the reins in order to try to bring the horse back under control. That's the imagery—that your mouth is out of control and you're pulling back on the reins and trying to get it stopped. The idea of **evil** is anything that is *hurtful or destructive.* Again, we are not just talking about words that come out of our mouth; we're talking about social media. This thought that we need to straighten everybody out; we need to correct everything; we need to vent our anger and our agenda, but the text is saying, "Don't do that. Pull it back. Get it under control."

The word **deceit** was translated in the King James as *guile*. It's a word that basically was used to describe *the baiting of a trap*. So it's anything that influenced an animal into the trap—that's the imagery. So it's lies; it's deceit; it's flattery; it's half-truths; it's manipulation. It's anything that we use to try to control and manipulate people with our words.

If you were with us this summer, this was a topic that came up a lot in The Proverbs. The Proverbs is all about *skillful living*, and the most discussed topic in The Proverbs is the tongue...is the mouth. It is virtually impossible to live skillfully if you don't have control of your mouth. In James, James describes the tongue *as a fire that sets a forest aflame and does unimaginable damage*. Again and again and again, the Scriptures remind us of the importance of controlling our mouths.

Again there is this tendency to think, "If we get up and take our stand, somehow that's what God wants." So we email; we post; we twit...twitter—whatever is out there—and somehow we're convincing ourselves that we're changing the world. But we have to at some point resign ourselves to the fact: we're not actually changing anything. Nobody is really listening to our words and saying, "Well, I think I'm going to change my worldview as a result of that!" The strategy, according to Peter, is the same strategy that Jesus laid out in the Sermon on the Mount. What is it that would cause our message to be compelling and ring true to an unbelieving culture? Answer is: when our behavior is so dramatically different from the rest of the culture that it causes people to wonder, "Who are these people and what is it that makes them so dramatically different?" So the second part of the strategy is verse 11:

> **"HE MUST TURN AWAY FROM EVIL AND DO GOOD;**
> Now this is the repetition of chapter 2, verses 11 and 12, *that we abstain from fleshly lusts, turn away from evil, and that we,* (verse 12,) *do good.* So it's the same message there.
> **HE MUST SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT.**

So again, this is not a hunker-down theology. This is not a grin-and-take-it theology. The word for **peace** in Psalm 34 is the word *shalom*. We've talked about that a lot in the last few years. It's this concept of *flourishing*. So rather than being angry and reactive and just like everyone else in the culture, we don't respond that way, but we very positively, proactively, pursue flourishing in little pockets wherever God has us. Whether it's at school, at work, in your neighborhood, in your hobbies, with your relationships—wherever God has you—you actively seek to create a pocket of flourishing that creates a glimpse of the world to come. And it provides a platform from which we share the good news of Jesus.

So the two parts of the strategy are to get control of our mouths and, very positively, actively pursue pockets of flourishing. Verse 12 is then the critical piece of that:

> **"FOR THE EYES OF THE LORD ARE TOWARD THE RIGHTEOUS,**
> **AND HIS EARS ATTEND TO THEIR PRAYER,**
> **BUT THE FACE OF THE LORD IS AGAINST THOSE WHO DO EVIL."**

Verse 12 is the critical ingredient to the strategy. You might even say verse 12 is the secret weapon for *the people of God*. What is the secret weapon? It is the *sovereign God*. To understand, at the end of the day, if we choose to trust Him, and to do it His way rather than our way, the part of the strategy that is going to supernaturally use this for good, to change the culture, is the power and presence of the sovereign God.

Now there are a couple of parts of this that are worth really pondering. One is when Paul writes to the Romans and enters into this discussion in Romans chapter 12—and the strategy is very similar to this—ultimately what he talks about is, "It is not our responsibility as *the people of God*, to seek vengeance. It's not our job to get even. It's not our job to fight back. We leave that to God."

Over the last several decades, we as an American culture have worked very hard to convince ourselves that God is merely a God of love, and we want to dismiss the concept that God is a God of judgment, that God is a God that ultimately judges people, and that vengeance is ultimately God's. The prevailing wisdom behind that is that if we believe that, it will make us, as a people, less judgmental, less intolerant, and more loving. So I ask you, "Twenty, thirty, forty years down the path, is that true? Are we more loving? Are we more compassionate? Are we less judgmental? Are we more tolerant?" And I think everyone in the room would agree, "Actually it's far worse!" We are more angry, intolerant, and judgmental. Why is that? There are several reasons, but in light of this discussion, it goes like this. In generations gone by, people understood that eventually people will answer to God. "That's God's job—doesn't need to be my job." But now that we have dismissed the concept that one day God will judge and set the record straight, the only option left on the table is, "If we're going to get even, it's up to me, and it's up to me to do it now."

Once we lose the concept of a sovereign God who in the end will judge, then we take on the responsibility of being judge and jury ourselves now. Think about all that's happening in the culture. That is what's going on. It's this idea that I need to get even and get my vengeance now or it won't happen. We, as *the people of God,* are called to trust God—that one day He will judge; He will reward the righteous; He will punish evil; He will set the record straight. Therefore, it's not our job. So I *don't return insult for insult.* I *don't return evil for evil.* It's not my job to do that. Instead, I choose to respond with a *blessing*. *I get control of my mouth and I proactively seek to create pockets of flourishing, and I trust God with the rest.* That's kind of like this core worldview, foundational theology in the Christian faith that we must understand to respond correctly.

The second part is to understand that, because ultimately this is about God, it's not necessary to have a majority. God has never won on the basis of a majority. Somewhere along the way, we've gotten all confused about this. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, some of this roots back to a very well-intended, but I think faulty movement around the *Moral Majority.* The idea is if we get the majority, then in kind of a power move we will take the country back. I think that got in the heads of lots of Christians—that to do this, we must be the majority. I think that's what drives a lot of Christians in so much political involvement. "Somehow we have to win the majority, and then we'll take over, and then things will be right." And what we fail to realize is: that is simply not theologically correct. Read your Bible! God has never been about winning through the majority. As a matter of fact, it is consistently the opposite. When the majority powers up and wins, everybody says, "The majority did that." But when a little teenage boy drops a huge warrior giant, the only conclusion is, "God did that!" Throughout history it's always been about a remnant—a remnant that trusted God, that was faithful to God. God did the most amazing things through a remnant so that people could not look at the remnant and say, *"You did this!"* But they would have to say, "*God did this*!" It's part of the way that God reveals Himself to the world. It's critically important to understand it's never been about a majority. A majority is not necessary. It's about *the people of God trusting God*—that with God on our side, we just need to do it God's way!

Peter has reminded us we are free in Christ, but we're not free to do as we please. We're free to be bondslaves to Christ, and to do it His way. To do it His way is to obey the commands of verses eight and nine—to get our mouths under control, which is critical in this culture, to actively pursue pockets of flourishing wherever God has us, and trust that the rest is up to God. Those of us willing to trust God will put on our gamefaces and we will choose to obey God's strategy, whether it's face-to-face or whether it's on social media. But when you go off at the mouth, when you go off on social media, it is your way of saying, "*God cannot be trusted. I won't do it His way; I'm going to do it my way."*

So here's the deal: At the end of the day, you have to own your own story. You can't blame everyone else. You get one shot at life and you have to own, *"This is my story. I cannot do much to change the culture; I absolutely cannot control the people around me, but I can choose my attitude; I can choose my perspective; I can choose my behavior; I can choose my response. I own my own story!*

If you're willing to trust God, then you will obey God's commands and do it His way. When we are like the rest of the culture, there simply is no distinction—we're just one more angry group. But when we choose to obey and we become set apart, radically *other than* the rest of the culture, the culture has to stop and look at us as being so odd and so different from the rest of the culture and wonder, "What is it that makes these people so different?" It is by that, that we reveal—on the basis of the grace and mercy of God—that we are indeed *the people of God.*

Our Father, we celebrate that on the basis of Your grace and mercy, we have become Your people...Your possession. God, that's a beautiful thing, but it comes with deep responsibility to rightly proclaim the message of the gospel—not just through words, but through our behaviors that are so radically other than the culture—that it reflects the power and the presence of Jesus in us. Lord, may we trust You and listen to You and obey Your commands, that we might rightly represent to a lost and dying world, that no matter what the circumstances, we would still love life and see good days. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Hope-filled Living in a Culture of Despair

1 Peter 3:8-12

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Opening Discussion

1. What does it mean to you to "own" your own story? Not just referring to the past but in terms of every day?

2. How much of what you experience every day can you control? How much can you control how the people around you treat you?

3. Is your ability to love life and see good days determined by others you can't control, or by circumstances you can't control, or up to you and your choices? Explain your answer.

Bible Study

1. Read I Peter 3:8, 9. Peter states, "To sum up." Summarize what we've learned from I Peter 2:9-3:7. Can you summarize it in one sentence?

2. How are we to treat others both in the family of God and outside the family of God? Review 2:21-25 as the basis for our behavior. Compare Romans 12:17-21.

3. Read I Peter 3:10-12. What is the background of Psalm 34? What was David facing when he wrote that Psalm? What was Peter facing? What were these people facing as Christians who were aliens and strangers? Is our situation worse than theirs? Given this, what is the chance we can love life and see good days given our circumstances?

4. What are the two main commandments in verses 10 and 11 in order for us to love life and see good days?

5. Compare Proverbs 15:1-4, 15, 16; 17:27, 28. James 3:1-12. To love life and see good days in a culture of despair we do not need to control the people around us, we need to control our mouths. What does this mean? How does this apply to social media?

6. What does it mean for you to pursue peace (flourishing) in your spheres of influence each day?

7. Part of what has fueled bad behavior by Christians is the idea that we need to power up and gain a majority to win the culture. However, God has consistently used a minority, a remnant even, to change the world. How does Peter remind us of this truth in verse 12?

Application

1. What one or two things can you do better to better fulfill your calling as defined by Peter? What do you maybe need to stop doing as well?

2. What are some practical things you can do to remind yourself of your calling each day?

3. What does it mean for you to own your own story? Do you have anyone else to blame if you do not love life or see good days?

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