

# Embodying Grace & Peace | How to Be the Church

## “Overcoming Evil”

First Peter 3.8-18; Romans 12.14ff

7.24.22

*To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> For, "THE ONE WHO DESIRES LIFE, TO LOVE AND SEE GOOD DAYS, MUST KEEP HIS TONGUE FROM EVIL AND HIS LIPS FROM SPEAKING DECEIT. <sup>11</sup> "HE MUST TURN AWAY FROM EVIL AND DO GOOD; HE MUST SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT. <sup>12</sup> "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." <sup>13</sup> Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? <sup>14</sup> But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, <sup>15</sup> but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; <sup>16</sup> and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. <sup>17</sup> For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. <sup>18</sup> For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit ...*

*(Romans 12) Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. <sup>17</sup> Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. <sup>18</sup> If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. <sup>19</sup> Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> "BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

We've been looking at how to be the church – and today we reach the END, final sermon in the series. **The question today is how to defeat evil with good** as the very last words in our passage charge us to do. “Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good”. It's something we ALL want – we don't want to live in an evil, corrupt society and we want the Church to be “salt and light” having a positive impact on its members and on our surroundings. How can the Church promote good and resist evil? (sounds like a job for crime-fighters and superheroes!)

I want to jump right IN today and look at:

1. **A Good Life (easier said than done!)**
2. **An Empathetic Life (linking to Power and to people)**
3. **An Intriguing Life (what's YOUR story?)**

If you scan the pages of the New Testament and search for a kind of unified strategy for influencing the world or winning hearts and minds or the Church exerting a good and positive influence in society, it basically comes down to being good.

You'll find it in one form or another in virtually all the NT Letters, the Apostles urging believers in Jesus to be good. Sometimes the good is urged on single Christians (1 Cor 7) on employees and employers (Col 3 & 4), on children, on parents, on husbands and wives and on citizens (Eph 5 & 6). There are sections sometimes called "house tables." (1Peter 3.1-7) If the Church can be good in all her various callings, she'll influence society in that direction – "So... BE good!"

The very word, "good" is repeated 8x in this first text and the IDEA of being genuinely GOOD is a dominant theme in both passages and throughout the NT. The second text has it as the BOTTOM LINE (final word!). We do wonder, though, if it's realistic...maybe a bit naïve.

The comic-genius Bob Newhart (92 years old!) was in a great skit a few years back (you can find it online). He plays a therapist. A woman comes in. He asks her how he can help. She describes that she lives in constant fear of being buried alive in a box. She thinks about it all the time and it makes it very hard for her to be in cars or elevators or even to be in small rooms. He says that he can cure her of this if she only follows his instructions to the tee. She says she's desperate and she'll do anything he says.

"The cure", he says, "is in these two words that I'm going to give you that you will incorporate into your life." She asks, "Should I write them down?" He replies, "We find that most people can memorize them."

"Are you ready for these words?"

"Yes."

"OK...here they are: (Ready?) Here they are: STOP IT!"

The skit's hilarious ... she goes on to tell about her other issues: bulimia ("Stop it!"), her destructive relationships with men ("Stop it!"). And she brings up her mother (He says, "We don't go there") She says, "Well, I have these dreams" (He says "We're definitely NOT going there!").

And as a viewer you get it ...we live in a society in which every bad habit or destructive behavior is now called a disorder...traceable to a bad upbringing...or psychologized away... and sometimes you want to just tell people (YOURSELF!), "just stop it"... but you can't. IN FACT, it rarely works when I use it on myself! It'd be nice – but there are complications... It's simplistic. Motivation is a mystery ... and as Romans CH 7 makes clear sometimes telling people to be good often has the opposite effect!

And, it might even be possible to be good... if not for... jerks. We're surrounded by bad drivers, rude shoppers, unreasonable managers, unjust systems that make it almost impossible to be good. Even if

I could master my motivations – I can't control other people. And when we try to be good and "Christian" I'm pretty sure people see through it and we look plastic in our efforts to ... be nice.

I heard a great interview with Alexandra Hudson who's about to release a book called, *Against Politeness: Why Politeness Failed America and How Civility Can Save It*.

She explains that according to the words themselves, politeness is from a Latin word meaning to polish. Civility is about virtue, about the conduct and duties relating to citizenship. Politeness is a technique; civility is an inward disposition and character similar to what we've said about Love and Nice.

And here, the NT writers, Peter and Paul, are calling us to an inward disposition NOT a technique. It's an organic, whole way of life that's NOT a checklist of laws that we master (like, "Ok, I think I nailed it on the be harmonious and sympathetic but I really have to work on this brotherly, kindhearted and humble in spirit parts!") No it's something beyond technique and something that grows (like fruit) all together, symmetrically.

And Peter quotes the 34<sup>th</sup> Psalm (that's the capital letter words indented in the first passage) words that focus on our speech – "keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceit" – like the one, MOST awful and untamable part of our behavior. Jesus Christ said, "It's what comes OUT of a person that makes him unholy...the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man... out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders." (Matt. 15.18-19)

It's your words that tell how good you are. Do you use words to build up, to tear down or do you withhold words that are needed out of fear or apathy? Words expose your heart. Just listen to what you say and what you fail to say... Do it for one week (spiritual exercise).

And what we'll realize after that exercise (I tried it once for SEVEN entire... minutes! And it was horrifying!) We can't tame the tongue said James, "But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God..." (3.8-9)

And let's be honest... we say things to our own family members and kids (vulnerable little children) that we would never say in the workplace or in public (certainly not in church!)... It's not fair. It's not just... but thankfully... there's news in this very passage directed at the unjust (end of the first section): "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God..."

And in those simple words we find NOT ONLY astonishing relief and peace... but a real key to being good... genuinely good, toward people we find hard to love and people who may really hate Christianity and hate us for believing the Gospel (basic message).

What we find is that Jesus Christ, the Incarnation of God Himself – He became flesh and blood, physical and human in order to identify with US. We are unjust and our words expose that more than anything else.

But we, who are believers in Jesus Christ and members of His Body the Church (as we've been seeing for the past 12 weeks!) – WE are learning, every time we look back to the Good News, we're learning that God, in Christ, not only empathized with us but became ONE with us. He became like us in every way but sin.

He never sinned – He always did the will of the Father from the heart like it was His food (Jn 4.34). He was the only absolutely good Man and all His words were true and healing and right – even when He spoke hard truths, it was done with a hope of leading people to God and forgiveness and real restoration.

He traded places with me, “the Just for [me] the unjust.” And He empathized with me, MORE, He identified with me – IN MY PLACE – in order to bring me to God.

And when I simply believe that – and receive the gift of His identification (that He took my place) then I can know that He was judged for my words... AND so that I could now begin to empathize and even identify with others. I can stand in their place (as He did for me) in order to bring them to God (as He did for me)!

The Pharaoh told the Israelites to make bricks without straw – but God is our Father and NOT our Pharaoh! He will not call us to be good without giving us the resources we need.

And this is why Paul (the second section) would say to those young Roman Christians, “weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice” i.e., “empathize and identify” – walk in their shoes, feel what they feel... You know what this is about because on the Grand Scale, Someone has done this for you!

This is the POWER we need to link to other people and the only Power that can actually change us nature and change NOT ONLY our behavior and politeness techniques but actually get down into our motives, character, desires and influence our hearts – the source of our words.

We can even begin to empathize with and stand in solidarity with our detractors and those who hate us.

I can remember the days when before I saw Jesus standing in my place being counted UNjust so that I could be counted just – I can remember when the Good News didn't seem so good...didn't seem true...was only a faerie-tale for weak/silly old people (in their 60s!) If my neighbor hates Jesus Christ and hates me because I belong to Jesus... I get it... I've been there.

And when that empowers and motivates me to love that neighbor (or that dad or cousin or daughter or brother) OUT OF THIS SENSE that Jesus empathized with ME SO I COULD EMPATHIZE WITH YOU – then, it comes across NOT as a technique or a sales-tactic or an effort add her scalp to my collection but as genuine goodness. And it MAY be used by God’s Holy Spirit to make that person... ashamed of herself.

I want that to happen NOT because I’m weirdly into shame... but because I realize that she – like I and like everyone who comes to God through Christ but feel redemptive shame. You must come to the end of yourself and feel the pain that YOU DON’T measure up!

This person with whom I identify and empathize, feels like he’s witnessed something unusual...in fact unique. And it feels like he can’t get away from it. It feels like hot coals on his head when I repay his meanness with kindness (because I empathize, sympathize and identify – I know what it’s like to BE him!), (quote) “that those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame...” – because she sees in YOU something that reminds her of Jesus Christ.

And when I suffer...when I bear up under an “enemy’s” insults and in that moment, I “sanctify Christ as LORD in my heart” i.e. I remind myself that this person isn’t the Lord, Jesus Christ is and NOTHING – not even death is Lord over Jesus... so why be intimidated? (1 Pet.3.14)

And maybe this person finds that intriguing. My old friend, the Francophile (French-speaker) Gordon Woolard told me that the word for a plot-line or narrative in French is “intrigue”. My story, YOUR story IN CHRIST is meant to be intriguing! Your plotline has been interrupted by grace and peace – your badness and careless words and record of wrongs have fallen on to Jesus Christ “who died for sins, once for all, the Just for the unjust” – that’s intriguing! He justified you.

And the life that Jesus is carving out... and making you to be is a plotline of His making. And we can know a seemingly insane degree of calm and confidence AND can also be “not wise in our own estimation but associating with the lowly – people it won’t benefit me to know (because I already have a Friend in High Places). We can be confident and humble at once! (More paradox!)

So, v. 15, as you, “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts always being ready to give an answer or MAKE A DEFENSE (an ἀπολογία) for the HOPE that is in you” and you can do that with gentleness and reverence.”

We don’t have to get freaky or defensive because we’ve sanctified or determined that Christ is Lord and the results of my sharing my source of hope with this person, the results depend on the LORD, not my cleverness or expertise or ability to close the deal.

In 2006, Christian Smith (prof at Notre Dame) finished his mammoth study on what American teenagers believe, he crunched the data and called the modern American religion, “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”

It's kind of based on Christianity but it's NOT Christianity. Those teenagers are now in their 30's... We have to empathize with them NOT so we can be nice or even polite, but we have to patiently listen and sort of trade places with them. We have to be unsure of ourselves and only certain about Jesus Christ.

When we have opportunity to live in front of them... and under the blessing of God's Spirit, they may ask us about what they find intriguing, we should know a little something about how to converse with them and their beliefs – and if our METHOD is in keeping with our message, we may just see them come to God.

In that process, the underwhelming method that Jesus used... we may see them desiring relief and peace with God. Let's be ready – always ready to give an answer, a non-defensive defense for our hope. Let's be intriguing and let's be ready.