

Prayer

O God, please hear our prayers. Strip away the unworthiness of our words, our deeds, our thoughts and our feelings, and hear those cries of the soul from deep within which even we who call out to You may not fully understand. Sift the truths which lie behind our needs and answer us according to our deepest spiritual needs, we pray, for You alone are the God of our Salvation. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: World Politics

Pray today for those regions of Africa where conflict is a way of life; where men and women suffer the tragedies of political failure; e.g. Sudan and Dafur, Zimbabwe, DR Congo.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those working in creative arts; film, music etc.*
- *Pray for those people who produce and market oil*
- *Give thanks to God for parents*

Meditation

Be light to me, Lord Jesus, be bright light;
Light which pierces through the darkness.

Be a bright redeeming hope for all the world
Illuminate a pathway for the God-ward walk ahead;
Warn of danger with a beacon, pierce the gloom;
Reveal the scandals of unrepentant sinfulness;
Enlighten hearts confused by murky worldliness;
Emanate the awesome brightness of Salvation;
Flood the church with fresh yet ancient teaching;
Brighten minds engaging with God's truth;

Be light to me, Lord Jesus, be bright light;
Light which pierces me, so I may radiate for You.

Bible Study - 1 Peter 3:8-12

⁸ *Finally, though, all of you should be of one mind, share your feelings, and be loving, kind and humble.* ⁹ *Do not pay back evil with evil, or curse with curse, but bless, instead, because you were called to do this so that you might inherit a blessing.* ¹⁰ *For,*

*'Those who want to enjoy life
and see good days,
must guard their tongues from evil
and their lips from speaking deceit.*

¹¹ *They must turn from evil and do good,
and must seek peace and pursue it.*

¹² *For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous
and his ears are attuned to their prayers,
but the Lord is firmly set
against those who do evil.'*

Review

This is a wonderful passage of scripture which is a great blessing to all. In it, Peter gives advice about living in Christian fellowship after an extended passage of his letter in which he gave controversial advice to converts about how to handle slavery and marriage (2:18-3:6). What is said here is clear, straightforward and applicable even to us today, and it contains advice which is well worth remembering. The passage is not intended as general guidance for worldly living, though it is easy to see how it could apply to this, it is the integrity of the Christian community which is at stake in everything Peter says here. He was speaking to people who had just been baptised, and it is thought that much of this passage comes from standard instructions given to converts before baptism.

The reason why this is possible is because the whole passage has been carefully constructed, and when you read it in the original Greek this is clear. You can still see the semblance of this structure in English however, for there are two clear sections and the first is verses 9 and 10. These two verses give a list of qualities which describe how we can fulfil Christ's command to 'love one another' (3:8 – see John 13:34f.) followed by some advice about how we deal with issues which arise within the fellowship of believers (3:9). Secondly, Peter quotes from Psalm 34:12-16 (3:10-12). You will find that the quoted psalm deals with roughly the same issues as the previous two verses but in reverse order (we will examine this in more detail later). It cannot be mere coincidence that Peter's words and the psalm correspond in this way, and so this is why people think Peter was quoting a set of instructions here rather than preaching or writing freely.

After the potential controversy of Peter's words about the submission of women to men in marriage (3:1-4), this text makes it clear that Peter's Christian principles are rooted in equality between all people whoever they are. There is no distinction between male or female when it comes to being of 'one mind', 'sharing feelings', and being 'loving, kind and humble' in Christian fellowship. These qualities are readily understandable, though we should expect that being of 'one mind' does not mean conformity in all the details of life, but having complete agreement within the fellowship of believers about the things of God. Sometimes we work on the assumption today that agreement within the church is impossible to achieve, but Peter presents us with a challenge to believe that because we are all saved by the one Jesus Christ, there must always be hope that Christians can agree. Perhaps we don't because we do not focus sufficiently on Christ!

The other components of advice in verse 8 are clearly conducive to good relationships within a group of people. We cannot know how to help one another, for example, unless we share our thoughts with each other in a spirit of mutual love, kindness and humility. In addition, there is a fair amount of advice about the use of the tongue (3:9,10) and this reminds us of the incredible power of speech to either curse or bless (see 3:9). There is little room for us to manoeuvre. Our words will either bless or curse, and even if we say some things in a considered way, some will try to read our intent through the manner in which we say things. We know this to be true because we all do it ourselves to others!

The Psalm reminds us that our actions, especially within the Christian community, are viewed by God Himself who knows full well the difference between what is appropriate behaviour and language for a disciple. We will not go wrong if we remember that the Lord is watching us not with the intent to catch us out, but to reveal the truth.

Going Deeper

There are details to this passage which we have not yet examined, and this is where we will now look for further inspiration and guidance. Firstly, we will look in more depth at the five key words of verse 8 and then the contrasts which make up verse 9. Then we will see how the quote from Psalm 34 reinforces the points that have been made and give a particular interpretation to the whole passage.

Notes on the text and translation

- V8 *'Finally, though ...'* You will not find the word 'though' in most translations. I have included it because the Greek contains a small particle 'de' which indicates that this subsequent advice is by way of contrast to what has been said previously, which is Peter's advice about marriage relationships and the responsibilities of men and women in marriage.
- V9 *'In order that you might inherit a blessing'* This last part of the verse is interesting. The verb is not the usual one for 'inherit', but means 'to take possession of' implying the receipt of something that is yours by right. Inheritance is the nearest we can get to this in English. The idea is that we inherit God's Kingdom blessings by acting in a godly manner.
- V10 *The whole of this verse is written in the singular; 'he who wants to enjoy life ... must guard his tongue ...'* However, this is a general statement, and it is therefore better in modern English to present a general statement in the plural rather than the singular, and this is what I have done here.
- V12 *'But the Lord is firmly set'* Here, the Greek words reflect the way that a Hebrew psalm speaks about the 'face of the Lord' being set against something which he abhors

The five qualities of Christian love (3:8)

In verse 8, Peter calls on all Christians to share these five qualities:

- to be 'of one mind' (see also Rom. 15:5, Phil. 2:2),
- to 'share feelings' (see also Rom. 12:15, 1 Cor 12:26),
- to be 'loving' (see Rom. 12:10, John 15:12),
- to be 'kind' (see also Eph. 4:32 and Col 3:12)
- and to be 'humble' (see also Eph 4:2, Phil. 2:3f.).

The first thing to note is that the Greek word used for 'loving' in this verse is 'philadelphos' which means neighbourly love or family love and affection. It is not the great New Testament word 'agape' used by Jesus when He said 'love one another'. This is why I am able to say that these five go together to make up what it means for Christians to show 'agape' love to each other. Clearly, the greater love Jesus speaks of must include the normal social qualities of love ('philadelphos'), and we have already looked at what it means to be of one mind (see above). This leaves three other qualities for us to bear in mind; 'sharing feelings', 'kindness' and 'humility'.

The true quality of 'sympathy' or 'sharing one's feelings' is the mutual recognition of one another within the fellowship. In different cultures people feel differently about how much they share of each other, but it is impossible for us to know each other and show the true qualities of empathy and care if we will not reveal something of ourselves. It is in sharing our vulnerabilities that we often take the first steps towards healing, for example.

The quality of 'kindness' frequently appears in lists of godly qualities such as the 'Fruit of the Spirit' (Gal 5:22f.), and no-one can ignore its importance to the Christian witness. By kindness, the Bible does not mean having a kind attitude, though that is essential if kind deeds are to be done, it generally means those kind deeds by which we help each other in times of difficulty or in simple acts of care and love. No-one can underestimate the effect of acts of kindness to true fellowship, and it is a mark of loss of fellowship when people do nothing for each other!

The last quality of being 'humble' is interesting, because Christians today know that true humility is exemplified by Christ, as in riding into Jerusalem on a donkey (Matt 21:1f.) What is not so well known is that the word from which humility comes in Greek means 'base' or 'simple' and it has a somewhat negative meaning. The church took that 'base' word and by

using the example of Christ, turned its meaning around to refer to a quality of service and self effacement which was not otherwise described in the Greek language. The word 'humble' itself came from very humble origins! Certainly one who read Peter's letter in the Greek would have spotted this, whereas we, for obvious reasons, do not.

The way to inherit a blessing (3:9)

In verse 9, a fundamental principle of Christian fellowship is described succinctly, and is worthy of our fullest attention. Keeping to this will avoid many a fraught church meeting and theological argument! 'Do not pay back evil with evil, or curse with curse, but bless ...' (3:9). It is a natural temptation for all people to return like for like, because we feel justified that if someone else can behave in a certain way to us then we are entitled to behave like that to them. Of course, the reason why such an attitude will always create trouble is because what people feel and what they say or do is not always as linked as we might like to think. Many a person feels hard done by because of someone else's words, for example, when no evil was intended, and the consequences of a bad reaction to this can even create problems when they did not exist in the first place! The devil will use our desire for vengeance through word and deed with glee, to create havoc in any Christian gathering!

Our duty before God, as Peter so clearly saw, is to return blessing when evil is done to us or when we are cursed by someone's words. All it takes is for us to do two things, and preferably in this order; firstly to remember that Jesus died for our sins and did not return our evil back on us, but saved us, secondly in the light of our Saviour's love for us, we can then access the power to act in the same way towards others. Just as not everyone who Jesus loves will love Him, so not everyone who we bless in such circumstances will realise what we are doing and cease either to do evil to us or curse us. However, by acting rightly before both God and others, we are justified, and keep ourselves pure and blameless before God.. We may not be able to do this all the time, but we should be able to do this enough to know the power of Christ's salvation at work in our lives and know that it works!

The confirmation of Psalm 34 (3:10-12)

Peter has constructed his advice to fit in exactly with Psalm 34:12-16, which starts now with similar guidance to that found in verse 9. If we desire the 'good days' (3:10, by which the Psalmist would have meant the 'blessing of God' and Peter would have meant the 'Kingdom of God', then the tongue must be controlled so that we do not speak ill advisedly; as the psalm goes on to say, our God-given task is to 'turn from evil and do good' (3:10). No-one is able to deal with either the tongue or the fractious nature of human relationships without a combination of personal intent and godly assistance. The Holy Spirit has been given to God's people precisely to help us in our need, and those who complain that they are simply not able to live up to these standards of Christian faith have unfortunately discounted the very source of a Christian's power! By the grace of God and the help of His Spirit, our task is to 'seek peace and pursue it!' (3:11).

In other words, the Christian life is one in which we each actively pursue the godly qualities of Christian fellowship which please God, for 'the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous' (3:12). These words from the Psalm now remind us of the righteous moral obligations and qualities previously mentioned by Peter in verse 8 (see above).

The passage concludes with a word of reassurance, and the use of Psalm 34 enables Peter to offer this scriptural comfort to those to whom he spoke. The Psalm says that the Lord's 'ears are attuned to their prayers', which means that He is constantly aware of the struggles of His people. By this we know that the Lord wants us to succeed in our Christian endeavour, and not fail. His face is 'set against evil', and if we are as well, then the enemy is defeated!

Application

There are many golden passages of good advice in scripture, and the Lord will lead us to one or other according to our particular needs and the problems we face either in our personal lives or in the fellowship of the church. This passage we have studied today is one which is helpful for a group of Christians attempting to overcome the barriers and problems which beset a church community and move forward together in faith. We can find here a complete set of instructions about appropriate godly attitudes within the fellowship of believers and also an encouragement to bless each other in all things.

Too often, Christian fellowship is based on groupings of people who get on well together because they are like minded about things of faith. This is an expression of 'philadelphos' (natural Christian affection), not the higher call to love one another with the 'agape' love of Christ which includes so much else; as this passage has taught us. Christian fellowship takes effort on our part, as we have learned. If we put in this effort and work at what it means to truly love each other with the qualities of love Peter mentions and also a positive attitude towards dealing with evil and refusing to return evil for evil, then we will build the true church of God which is His Kingdom here on earth.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Look up some of the other Scriptures where speech and the use of the tongue are discussed (James 3:5f.). What does scripture consistently teach us?
2. Why is it so hard to love one another, and why do we have to work at it?
3. In your group, pray together to ask the Lord's forgiveness for things that have gone wrong in your fellowship, and do so expecting the Lord to bless you!

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The Church of God needs much scriptural advice today. Many good churches are led with good intent by people who are driven by methods and ways of doing things which are based not on God's Word, but on ways of doing things which are either fashionable or strongly driven by particular strong leaders. Let us all keep close to God's Word so that God's people may be one!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *How do you feel that you measure up to the qualities described in this passage of scripture? Write down a list of the qualities as you see them and keep it in your diary. Look at it from time to time during your working day and see if you are behaving in a way which pleases the Lord, particularly towards other Christians.*
- *Set aside a week for special prayer for your own Christian fellowship or church. Prayer for the leaders and all those involved in it, and pray for God's blessing.*

Final Prayer

Lord God and Almighty Father, create in Your people such a desire for holiness that Your Spirit moves afresh to bring renewal. Change our speech, change our worship, change our ministry, change our hearts, and empower us to do what is right for each other, for You, and for those amongst whom we live; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.