

Make the Church a Refuge

Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing. For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile: Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it. For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil.

1 Peter 3:8-12

Picture this Christian's week: she goes to work and is ridiculed for being a Christian. Her co-workers are always making snide remarks about Miss Holy-Roller. Moreover, her manager despises anything religious and so intentionally make life hard for her. He deliberately passes her over when it comes to promotion, and has even accused her of wrongdoing when she is innocent. When she gets home, her husband is a cold, distant man. He hates all mention of Christianity, and continually says and does things to goad her and try to provoke a nasty reaction out of her.

Now when she comes to church, what do you think she would be seeking? One word might sum it up: refuge. She is seeking a place unlike that which she deals with all week; and relationships unlike those that oppress her and persecute her all week. She is seeking an oasis, a shelter, a sanctuary from what the world and the devil throw at her all week.

But sadly, for many a Christian attending many a church, Sunday is anything but a refuge. Instead, it is a tense, uncomfortable experience, an unpleasant meeting with people you'd otherwise rather not be with. Gossip, backbiting, unkind words, bitterness, malice, envy, jealousy, division, cliques and every manner of relationship-sin you find in the world is found in the church.

Peter writing this Scripture to say: Christians, make church a refuge. He has been talking about being pilgrims and strangers in the world, how the world will reject you as they rejected Christ. He's been instructing to keep our behaviour honourable, non-retaliatory and submissive in the face of ungodly government, employers and masters, and even husbands.

Now he uses the word "*finally*," not to signal the end of the letter, but the end of this section on how to respond to this world. And his last word on this section is basically this: since the world is going to reject you, make sure you receive one another. Love one another, receive one another, so that every believer longs to meet together. So, how do we make the church a refuge?

1. Be likeminded

This word means 'of the same mind,' or not diverse in mindset. Consider these verses:

Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits.

Romans 12:16

Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus:

Romans 15:5

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

1 Corinthians 1:10

Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.

2 Corinthians 13:11

Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.

Philippians 2:2

Unity and a haven from the world begins here – when we are of one mind. What does that mean? When our judgments, our views, our priorities, our goals, our ambitions, our purposes, our attitudes – are one. How is that possible? How can such a group of diverse people be of one mind regarding life? Surely, we will have a boiling pot of differing views, opinions, attitudes that we have adopted through our family, our upbringing, our culture.

Yes, but if all those minds submit their thinking to the Word of God, we will be of one mind. Think of the tuning of pianos. If you try and tune 100 pianos to each other, you will have a headache of a time. But if you use one tuning fork, and tune each one to that same tuning fork – they will all be in harmony. Yes, each may have a distinctive sound, just like each of us have distinctive personalities and likes and dislikes. But if each of us are tuned to the Word of God as our absolute authority, we will be of one mind.

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Romans 12:2

Recognise, we do not come into church realising what self-centred people we are. We do not realise what relational terrorists we can be if not changed by the Word of God. That is why 'be of one mind' is a command. Do not be the mind which is out of sync with others through a lack of submission to God's Word.

Now, that does not mean we will agree on the small and trivial details of life. It means, we agree on what God says regarding the main issues of the Christian life, how to relate to one another, how to forgive, how to speak to one other, and on the main doctrines of the Christian life.

2. Be compassionate to one another

The word compassionate points to sympathy and empathy, the idea of feeling together.

For we have not a high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.

Hebrews 4:15

Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.

Romans 12:15

God is telling us that the church is to be a refuge where your brothers and sisters seek to walk in your shoes. There is genuine interest in one another's wellbeing and life. That's why we are to stay and fellowship – to

talk and **listen**. Do you really listen when you ask the question, “*How are you?*” Listening means more than waiting for the other person to finish without interrupting. It means hearing what they are saying, and asking more questions.

The Bible does not call on us to always solve one another’s problems, because that won’t always be possible. But the call is – feel what the other is feeling. That is why every church gathering should be bittersweet times of rejoicing with some, weeping with others, being burdened with others. You may not be able to know exactly what they are feeling, but seek to. What gets in the way here is self-centredness, one’s own problems, wants, wishes, and ways.

3. Be fond of one another

This is the third time Peter is exhorting brotherly love. Here he uses the word *philadelphus*: ‘be loving brethren.’ The idea here is, be genuinely fond of each other. *Agape* love speaks of self-sacrificial love for another at my own expense. *Phileo* love speaks of fondness, the joy that friends have in each other. The command here is to *like* each other.

Sometimes you hear people say, ‘you must love each other, even if you don’t like each other.’ That’s true if what you mean is that you must love one another even when the feelings of affection aren’t there. But that’s true for any relationship. But it’s not true if what we mean is, as a general rule, ‘I don’t like my brother or sister in Christ, they annoy me, irritate me and I dislike their presence intensely, but I will still love them.’ I struggle to imagine what kind of love that would be!

The Bible is commanding us to be fond of each other. How do I become fond of someone who has many flaws?

- Forgive them their sins.
- Be patient with their flaws: “*Love is not easily provoked.*”
- Accentuate their strengths: “*Love believes all things.*”
- Cultivate a relationship: “*Love suffers long.*”

4. Be tender-hearted

The Old English word for tender-hearted carries the concept of ‘pitiful.’ Do not be cold or indifferent to each other. It grieves the Holy Spirit of God if His children should stand in proximity to one another and harden their hearts against reaching out to each other. Do not expect to see and know God if you harden your heart against other brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Greek word here is actually a compound of two words – one meaning *well*, and the other referring to the *emotions*: it means something like “well-emotion-ed.” Now think about that meaning that your emotions are ready to move in the direction of your brothers and sisters in Christ. There is no coolness or hardness, or indifference to the needs of others.

See, a cold heart is very inflexible with its emotions. It refuses to bend to stoop, to feel pain, to try. Here’s the reason: it is proud. And it foolishly reasons – ‘the best thing for my mind and my heart is if I do not get too involved with other believers’ (not romantically – that’s another issue altogether!) ‘So I must maintain a distance, to protect my heart.’

God says the opposite. He does not say protect your heart from being vulnerable and exposed to hurt, He says – tenderise your heart even more, and throw yourself into loving others. Humility accepts the fact that hurt is part of serving others. It comes with the package of being a sinner in a sinful world.

And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

Ephesians 4:32

5. Be friendly

Some texts read here – ‘humble-minded’, the majority of text has it as ‘courteous’. The main idea here is to be friendly. Try to make each other feel at home. Seek to set each other at ease. When we are in one another’s presence, we should sense the warmth, the genuine friendliness that says, ‘I’m glad you’re here. I want you to be here. Feel welcome to talk to me.’ How sad when our depraved hearts seek to rejoice in making others feel awkward when we are ‘in.’

6. Return only good

There are three ways to treat others. One is to return evil for good – that is wicked. The second is to return good for good. That is normal and nothing out of the ordinary. The third is to return good for evil.

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so?

Matthew 5:44-47

In return for slander, you say only good things about them or refuse to slander them in return. In return for unfounded criticism, you praise them where you can. In return for snubbing you, you greet them and go after them. In return for a sarcastic remark, you speak gently and kindly. In return for a provocative comment seeking controversy, you speak words which put the fire out.

Earlier on, we had Peter tell us that Jesus did not respond in kind to the things done to him. If your concern is always that people treat you the way you ought to be treated, you are very likely to seek revenge. But a person who has yielded up the idea of ‘my rightful treatment’ and is instead focusing on ‘my right responses,’ will be a source of blessing.

Jesus did not focus on how He ought to have been treated. He instead focused on how He ought to respond so as to please God and love man. Notice Peter uses the word ‘knowing’ in “*knowing that ye are thereunto called...*” You can respond this way since you know something. And what is it that we know? That we will inherit a blessing.

We have a blessed inheritance in Christ, reserved for us. Why must we fight for our rights, if Christ is ours? Why must we retaliate, fight back, get our own back, if a blessing is guaranteed? When we fight – we are saying, ‘You can’t do that! You can’t rob me of my dignity of my rights!’ But if we realise, in Christ, I am secure, I am complete in Him, I have every spiritual blessing in Him – we can suffer evil at the hands of another believer and put the fire out by responding with good.

Now, as Peter thinks on this idea of inheriting a blessing, it brings to his mind **Psalm 34:12-16**. Here the Psalm sums up so much of how we are to make the church a refuge:

- 1) Guard your tongue.
- 2) Turn away from evil, turn to doing good.
- 3) Deliberately seek peace.

And if we take what we've looked at so far, that is a perfect fit. It is the tongue that begins fights and contentions when we are not of one mind. So bridle your tongue. When you are not of one mind, first check to see if you are in line with the Scriptures, with all of the Scripture, before speaking. Use your tongue to be compassionate. Ask how people are, and mean it. Be fond of others and say those things which encourage and build joy in each other. Speak words of appreciation and praise.

Be tender-hearted. Use your words to be warm and involved with one another, soft and responsive to each other. Be friendly – use your words to welcome one another, to make each other feel special, not small or foolish or awkward. Then the Psalmist tells us to turn away from evil and pursue doing good. Refuse to harm another believer, even if they have harmed you. Continue to do good, even to those who harm you.

And then he sums it up: seek peace and pursue it. Don't be touchy. Don't be a porcelain Christian – everyone must hold you with trembling careful hands lest they get on your bad side. Be known as a thick-skinned, soft-hearted, flexible, tolerant Christian. Be known as a peacemaker. And then look at the reward for such a person!

Let me give you some things which get in the way of having a renewed mind that will be in harmony with others:

For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil."

1 Peter 3:12

This is how the Word of God tells us to make the church a haven. Now in contrast to the Word of God – let me give three ways to ruin your fellowship with Christians, and their sense of belonging and joy in being here:

- 1) **Letting emotions be your guide.** You may say or hear sentence that start, "Well, I just feel that..." "I don't know why, but I just don't like that..." "I don't feel peace about..." "I treat you this way because I feel..." Now, emotions are very important. But emotions come from our thinking. And that is why it is dangerous to just act on whims, impulses and passing feelings. If you live like that, you will never re-orient your mind to the Word of God. You will always act on how favourable you feel. That is disastrous to relationships. Love for one another thrives not on how I feel, but on what God said. When I tune my mind to what God says, my feelings will catch up.
- 2) **Letting habits be your guide.** This is where you simply call on how you have always related to others as your guide for relating to others now. Especially if you have not had too much trouble, you figure you can just be sweet, and enjoy Biblical unity. "Well, this is how I have always done it" or "This is how my parents did it." In fact, you do it as you have always done it, you are not growing, you are not changing, and therefore, you are not getting closer to this command. Even if how you have always related has worked, you need to submit your own wisdom to the Word of God and learn – how does God say I must think and act?
- 3) **Letting personality be your excuse.** This is when we repeat the well-worn phrase, "That's just the way I am" "I'm not the sort of person who..." "I'm very straightforward, I don't beat around the

bush.” Very often, so-called personality is actually engrained sin, or habits of sin. It does no good to blame a lack of tact, or a bitter spirit, or a refusal to reach out, or a revengeful spirit, or a destructive tongue, on personality. Very often, what people call personality is simply their character, and God calls on you to submit your mind to His Word and have your character transformed.

Your guide cannot be your emotions, your traditions, or your personality. It has to be what God says. Here is the thing. As believers, we all claim Jesus as Lord. That means that what Jesus says *to* one of us will not contradict what He says to another *of* us. If two Christians both obey the same Lord, there will be unity. When there is division, you can be sure that one or both Christians are disobeying their Lord’s instructions regarding how to relate to each other.

In conclusion, a Christian who is living for the Lord is opposed almost all the time. They fight with their flesh. At work they may be opposed by colleagues who mock or ridicule their faith. At home they may face persecution from unsaved family. In society they are bombarded with the world’s philosophy trying to change their mind.

Church is not supposed to be another place of suffering. It is to be a welcome refuge, a relief, an oasis of refreshment in a desert. But here’s the thing. Wherever we go, we take our sin nature with us. So if you’re at church, and I’m at church, we are at once the means for unity and a threat to unity. My Spirit-controlled new nature is the means for unity. My flesh is the threat to unity. We must deny ourselves, and fight to maintain the unity that God has given us in Christ. Make it, and keep it, a refuge that you long to return to.