

Commit to Doing Good

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a four-part series

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1 Peter 3:8–18 (Common English Bible)

⁸ Finally, all of you be of one mind, sympathetic, lovers of your fellow believers, compassionate, and modest in your opinion of yourselves. ⁹ Don't pay back evil for evil or insult for insult. Instead, give blessing in return. You were called to do this so that you might inherit a blessing. ¹⁰ For

*those who want to love life
and see good days
should keep their tongue from evil speaking
and their lips from speaking lies.*

¹¹ *They should shun evil and do good;
seek peace and chase after it.*

¹² *The Lord's eyes are on the righteous
and his ears are open to their prayers.*

*But the Lord cannot tolerate
those who do evil.*

¹³ Who will harm you if you are zealous for good? ¹⁴ But happy are you, even if you suffer because of righteousness! Don't be terrified or upset by them. ¹⁵ Instead, regard Christ as holy in your hearts. Whenever anyone asks you to speak of your hope, be ready to defend it. ¹⁶ Yet do this with respectful humility, maintaining a good conscience. Act in this way so that those who malign your good lifestyle in Christ may be ashamed when they slander you. ¹⁷ It is better to suffer for doing good (if this could possibly be God's will) than for doing evil.

¹⁸ Christ himself suffered on account of sins, once for all, the righteous one on behalf of the unrighteous. He did this in order to bring you into the presence of God. Christ was put to death as a human, but made alive by the Spirit.

Are you seeking peace? Then do something good!!

Why do we come to St. Andrew? Why do we commit our time to this place? Why do we commit our *money* to the work of this community? There are certainly plenty of good causes to which we could commit our resources and ourselves; the needs of this world are without limit. So why are we here? Why now?

I won't pretend that I can answer this question for us all, but I know why I'm here. I've learned over the course of my life that there is something wrong with us, something wrong with this world. We make so many terrible choices. In ways large and small, we make a wreck of so much and of so many. I've seen this in myself and in all those I've ever known and loved.

So that's the first thing I've learned – *there's something wrong us.*

The second thing is this – *no amount of therapy is going to fix us.* What is wrong with us is deeper than any amount of therapy can reach. Don't get me wrong. Therapists of varying stripes do much good, helping people to live better, more loving, and more productive lives. But the best of the therapists can't reach the primal root of what is wrong with us. I've learned that no amount of education or good intentions or programs or government or therapy or anything that comes from within ourselves can deal with what is really wrong with us.

And so I came here. Not because St. Andrew offered me therapy, but because it is here that I met the one who "suffered on account of sins, once for all, the righteous one on behalf of the unrighteous" (1 Peter 3:18). Or to rephrase it, it is here that I met the one who suffered on account of what is wrong with us, the right for the sake of the wrong.

It is here that I met our Lord, who didn't offer me therapy, but salvation, a rescue from my wrongness so that I might be brought "into the presence of God." How could my commitment be any less than 100%?

This salvation, this rescue, affords me the confidence to embrace my remaking, as God works in, through, and with me to renew my mind and heart, driving back the darkness even as I step into God's light. For indeed, I have come to see that I didn't need to be fixed, I needed to be transformed – a need that is shared by us all. We may not want to admit it or acknowledge it – but, yes, we are all in need not just of transformation, but salvation.

I've also come to see that this work of putting us right must take place in a community that has committed itself to Jesus Christ and his work. How could it be otherwise? How could we claim to be committed to Jesus and ignore his Body, the Church? Dealing fully with our "wrongness" is both God's work and our work – so that we might truly become the righteous people into which God has already made us.

Thus, Peter speaks to what it really means to live among others as we cling to and work out the salvation that is ours in Christ. Not only that, we have to think about what this rescue means for how we are to live in the Church and also in the world, much of which is still lost in darkness.

Living among and with others

Today's passage is part of a large section of Peter's letter, 2:11-4:11. This section focuses on how these believers are to live in the midst of indifference and even outright hostility that has led to their alienation and suffering. Should they isolate themselves and build fences within which they can strive to live the Jesus way? Should they march out ready to do battle, at least figuratively, with all who oppose them or have caused them pain and loss?

David Bartlett¹ highlights two ways these passages are often read. First, he notes that in John Elliot's reading, these believers are genuine outcasts from society and that their concern was to form a strong group identity:

For the Christian community, in other words, there exists a different standard of values, namely the will of God in the exemplary obedience of Jesus Christ, which distinguishes it from outside society. In the estimation of the Gentiles, the Christians amount only to a motley collection of lowly aliens, ignoble slaves, religious fanatics and "Christ-lackeys" obsessed with self-humiliation. Within the family of God however, and in God's estimation, Christians enjoy a new status that can only be retained by avoiding conformity to the degrading social norms of the Gentiles.

David Balch, on the other hand, looks at Peter's "household code" and hears Peter urging these believers to live virtuously as an example to those who persecute them.

Bartlett rightly notes that these communities probably embraced both perspectives. We sometimes sum this dilemma up with a phrase like, "be in the world but not of the world." We, like these Christians in Asia Minor, can't very well just withdraw from the world. Jesus told us to go to the ends of the earth and make disciples. "You are the light of the world," Jesus told his disciples. "Let your light shine before others . . ."

No, we can't withdraw from the world; even when tough times might make us feel like we want to. We are to be a witness to others, honoring God in all that we do. We are to be honorable people of a "tender heart and a humble mind," even as we strive to preserve and to grow not only our families but the body of Christ.

Thus, Peter tells the husbands that they are to honor their wives. The women who are married to unbelievers are to remind themselves that the "purity and reverence" of their lives may win their husbands over to Christ. Slaves are to accept their masters'

¹David Bartlett's commentary on 1 Peter is found in the *New Interpreters' Bible*. The quote from Elliott is from a quotation in Bartlett.

authority, even that of masters who are harsh.² If they or, for that matter, any believer suffers, they at least know that Christ suffered for them. All are to honor everyone, even the emperor!

In all their relationships, perhaps especially so amidst the tensions and stresses of hardship, the believers are to “have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.”

“Seek Peace and Pursue It” (1 Peter 3:11, Psalm 34:14)

Peace so often eludes us. We find ourselves to be anxious and uncertain, unsure of where to turn next or how to go about finding the life we seek. The ancient Jews understood that the peace we seek can be found only in our relationship with God. They had a word for this: *shalom*. It cannot be translated with a single word. *Shalom* is prosperity, health, peace, wellness, completeness, safety, harmony, satisfaction, fulfillment, unity, victory, restoration.

Though we usually think of peace in the sense of our own inner peace, *shalom* for the ancient Jews was often a relational word, nearly synonymous with justice. It was about two persons living in an equitable, often covenantal, relationship. Thus, in the Old Testament, *shalom* can come when a payment is made or an obligation is met, for equity is restored between the two parties. Payment of the tithe, what was to be returned to God, was crucial to maintaining the Israelites’ covenantal relationship with YHWH.

Simply put, *shalom* is the restoration of wholeness. It is well-being and is bound up with our relationship with God. Only when we love God and love neighbor, which is the heart of that relationship and which is grounded in action, can we find the peace we seek and that God desires for us.

But we cannot expect to find this peace so long as we hold back any portion of ourselves or our life, as if what matters is *only* our time or *only* our talents or *only* our money. And it won’t come if we give from the leftovers, rather than from the first fruits of our lives and work. The wholeness that is *shalom* is just that, encompassing all that we are and have, holding nothing back.

“Doing good”

In 3:10-11, Peter draws on Psalm 34:12-16 to help the believers see better the shape of this life to which they have been called and which will sustain them through their present hardships. Peterson paraphrases the psalmist’s words this way: “Turn your back on sin, do something good; Embrace peace – don’t let it get away!”

As I reflected on this passage and my own “desire to see good days,” as the psalmist put it, I was drawn to the simple encouragement to do something good. Having survived tough times in my life, I know well that it is so tempting to withdraw from the world when the storm hits, to crawl into a corner and lick my wounds.

But Christ calls us to reach out to others, to family and friends, even to strangers. Reach out not so much looking for help, but seeking to provide help. Struggles, anxieties, and difficulties challenge us to get outside ourselves, to see that there are those who desperately need our help.

At St. Andrew we live out this calling together in a myriad of ways. We provide scholarships to worthy students, we provide medical care in our Costa Rican clinic, we provide tons of food to the hungry through our food pantry, we provide winter coats through Joseph’s coat, we counsel and assist women who are suffering abuse and crisis, and much more. We even help low-income girls get ready for their prom so they can be included, not excluded.

For more than a quarter of a century, St. Andrew has demonstrated its commitment to doing good. The only question is whether each of us will join in!

²Again, verses such as this fall hard on ears and on our hearts. The choice is either to ignore them, pretending they are not there, or try to read them within their historical context and strive to discern meaning for ourselves. The fact that these sorts of verses were horrifyingly misused to justify slavery in America, shouldn’t blind us to the fact that even here, God may have a message for you and for me.

Our Responsibilities in God's House

Often, when we speak of our responsibilities in God's house, we speak of our "stewardship." In Greek, the word for house is *oikos* and the person who oversees the house, who manages it, is called an *oikonomos*. This word is used ten times in the New Testament and is translated variously (based on the context) as steward, or manager, or treasurer in the NRSV. Jesus tells a parable about a bad steward (Luke 16: 1-13). This is the story of a trusted steward who squanders the property of his master, which was a particularly despicable crime in Jesus' day. The moral of the story is something like this: use what you possess to serve people because everything you have was given you by God!

Later in Peter's letter, he reminds us that we, the people of God, are to be "good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). When writing to a congregation he founded in Corinth, Greece, Paul referred to himself as "a servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God," and as a steward, was required to be "trustworthy" (1 Cor 4:1-2). Clearly, Peter and Paul knew that their responsibilities to God extended far beyond their possessions.

Leonard Sweet suggests that "steward" is probably not the best way to think about this. After all, he notes, who really uses the word anymore, other than to refer to someone you might meet on a cruise ship! Instead, Sweet suggests that "trustee" is more meaningful for us and would be a better translation of the Greek. Many of us have some experience with trusts and the responsibilities held by trustees, even if it is simply some sort of family estate. When we think of ourselves as God's trustees, the message of the Bible becomes a little clearer. We are given dominion over God's creation, not so we can rule as a tough or selfish taskmaster, but so we can be effective trustees of God's wealth, managing it wisely, helping it to grow and flourish. God's creation is not ours, we don't own it; rather, we hold it in trust. We hold the Christian faith in trust and we are charged with guarding what has been entrusted to us (1 Timothy 6:20). We, God's people, the body of Christ, the church, have received a treasure, a trust, given by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 1:14). This treasure is the truth about God and the proclamation that Jesus is Lord!

Understanding our responsibilities as being those of a trustee turns our talk about money and financial giving on its head. I've been in many Sunday school classes and when the subject comes up, people always end up talking about tithing. Pretty soon, somebody would ask the inevitable question – do we tithe on pre-tax or after-tax income! But this is all backwards. It assumes that all the stuff and money we have is ours and the challenge is to figure out how much we want or need to give to God. Do I give 1%, 2%, 5%, or even 10%? Tithing is a long tradition in the Christian church, but it has always been more talk than tithe! You see, tithing is not the approach of the trustee. Trustees of God's gifts recognize that, yes, everything we have – all the money, cars, houses, stuff – is a gift from God. We use what we need and then grow the rest for God. Do we need to keep for own use 80% of what God entrusts to us? 85%? 90%? 95%?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. I make the point that tough times, stresses and anxieties, too often cause us to turn inward, away from family and friends. Do you agree? If so, why do you think this is? Wouldn't it be more logical that we'd reach out to others? What holds us back? What are some concrete ways you could encourage yourself to reach out to others in tough times? What are some ways you could encourage others to reach out to you?
2. Peter lifts up for us a passage from Psalm 34, including "do good." I'm not sure that Peter really intended to remind the believers that helping others is a great way to get through hardships, but it is certainly excellent advice. Helping others takes our focus off our own troubles and provides genuine aid to those who need it. Do you agree with this perspective? Have you participated in a mission project lately or deliberately provided a service to others? What are some ways you could get started?
3. God has given us all talents and abilities. Some we have discovered in ourselves, some may be waiting to be discovered. Some we've cultivated, others we've ignored. Sometimes, we even fail to understand that it's all a gift. How would you summarize what Peter wants us to understand about the gifts? For what purposes has God given us any gifts at all? Of all that you have, tangible and intangible, what is the hardest for you to see as a gift from God? What are some concrete ways we can be better stewards of what God has entrusted to us?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus teaches his disciples that they are to be light to the world. They cannot stay hidden away.</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Peter 2:11 – 4:11 Peter's entire passage about living with others.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Romans 13:1-7 Paul writes about the relationship of believers to their government.</p>	<p>Thursday, Ephesians 5:21 – 6:9 One of Paul's household codes.</p>
<p>Friday, Titus 2 A bit of a household code, emphasizing doing good for others for the sake of the gospel.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

