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THE GOOD LIFE AND HOW TO LIVE IT

1 Peter 3:8-12

by

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1 Peter Lesson 16

THE GOOD LIFE AND HOW TO LIVE IT 1 Peter 3:8-12

“Ah, the good life!” When you hear that phrase, you probably think of Beverly Hills, Palm Springs, or some other such place where the rich and famous lounge around their swimming pools or cruise by in their Rolls Royces. But we all know that that’s not the good life. People in Beverly Hills or Palm Springs aren’t any happier on the average than people in Flagstaff or any other city. In fact, some of the most miserable people in the world are those who live for the things money can buy.

So what is the good life and how do we live it? The truly good life comes from having God’s blessing upon us, particularly in the area of healthy relationships. In fact, God’s blessing is inseparable from having healthy relationships. As 1 John 4:20 bluntly asserts, if we say that we love God but we hate our brother, we’re liars, because if we do not love our brother whom we have seen, we cannot love God whom we have not seen. Being rightly related to God and to others sums up the message of the Bible (Matt. 22:37-40). So the good life is tied up with good relationships. If, so far as it depends on you, you’re at peace with others (Rom. 12:18), life is sweet, even if you don’t have an abundance of things. But if you’re constantly at odds with others, then you can have all the stuff in the world, but life isn’t so good.

Peter (3:10-11) quotes from Psalm 34 which says that if we want to love life and see good days, then we must do some things with our lips (3:10, which relates to 3:9) and our lives (3:11, which relates to 3:8) that result in healthy relationships. Then Scripture promises that God’s blessing will be on us (3:12). If we don’t live like that, the contrary is true: The face of the Lord will be against us.

The good life results from following God’s principles for healthy relationships: Doing good in our walk and talk.

Peter is summing up (3:8) here the section that began in 2:11-12, where he tells us how to live as aliens or pilgrims in this wicked world. The theme, which continues into chapter 4, is our witness in this

hostile territory. Christians are to be distinct in their behavior, noted for obedience to God and submission to proper authority, whether toward government (2:13-17), on the job (2:18-25), or in the home (3:1-7). The commands he gives in this summary section are contrary to the world and its ways and are opposed to our own natural inclinations. If we live like Peter tells us here, we will be foreigners in this world, but we will have a powerful witness for God.

Before we look in detail at how we must live to experience the good life, I want to underscore that our motive for living this way should be to please and glorify God. Our enjoyment of life is a by-product of seeking to please God. God has designed life so that when we seek to make Him look good (= "glorify Him") by obeying His commands, we inherit a blessing (3:9). When our motive is selfish--using God to make us happy--we come up empty. There are two broad areas where we must seek to please God: Our walk (our behavior, including our attitude); and, our talk.

1. The good life results from healthy relationships which result from doing good in our walk.

"Let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it" (3:11). This quote from Psalm 34 supports 3:8: "To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit." You will note that there is something we must turn away from--doing evil; and something we must actively pursue--doing good and seeking peace.

- A. Doing good in our walk means turning from evil and pursuing peace.

Implicit in 3:11 is the truth that we all have a natural bent toward evil. The word "evil" is used five times in this paragraph and refers to living for ourselves in disregard of God and others, except as they can serve us. Adam and Eve's original sin, which plunged the entire human race into sin, was an act of self-will that sought self-fulfillment in disobedience to the command of God. The new birth does not eradicate that evil bent toward self, as any honest Christian will readily admit.

For example, when I'm driving to work (in my case, it's the Lord's work!) and I'm listening to the Christian radio station and praising the Lord, and some guy cuts in front of me so that I have to hit my brakes, why don't I instinctively respond by blessing him and praying for his salvation? The answer is the same as the answer for why a toddler throws a tantrum: I didn't get my way and I want my way! In fact, when I analyze my anger, I find that most of it stems from one source: I want my way and I didn't get my way.

The well-known line from the "Pogo" cartoon says it well: "We have met the enemy and he is us." The barrier to the good life, the thing that hinders healthy relationships that bring glory to God, is self. The root of most interpersonal problems is our selfishness in wanting our own way. We all prove it by sitting here thinking, "Yes, I wish my mate would stop being so selfish (so that I could get my way)!" We must turn from evil which means, from the selfishness which marks all of us as fallen sinners. We have to make a conscious choice to deny self on a daily basis.

But it's not enough just to deny self or turn from evil. Also, we must actively do good and pursue peace with others. The Apostle Paul put it, "If possible, so far as it depends upon you, be at peace with all men" (Rom. 12:18). And, "Let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another" (Rom. 14:19). In other words, peace won't just happen as we're indifferent or passive. We've got to go after it aggressively.

I read about a mother with a scout troop who said to her son, "I will not take any of you to the zoo if you don't forgive Billy for stealing your candy bar." "But Billy doesn't want to be forgiven," her son complained. He won't even listen."

"Then make him," his mother said angrily. Suddenly, her son chased Billy, knocked him to the ground, sat on him, and yelled, "I forgive you for stealing my candy bar, but I'd sure find it easier to forget if you'd wipe the chocolate off your mouth!" (Told by Josephine Ligon, "Your Daffodils Are Pretty," *Christianity Today* [3/2/79], p. 18).

We're not supposed to be *that* aggressive in pursuing peace! But you get the idea. We can't be indifferent or passive about it. Jesus said

that if you're worshipping God and suddenly remember that your brother has something against you, leave the worship service, go be reconciled to your brother, and then come back and worship God (paraphrase of Matt. 5:23-24). We are to take the initiative to do all we can to restore strained relationships.

It's always time consuming and more of a hassle to do that than it is to let it slide. We'd rather not expend the emotional energy and time involved in getting things straightened out. We figure that time will heal. Besides, it's always humbling to admit I was wrong! So we don't actively pursue peace. Of course, love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8); we aren't supposed to confront a person every time he offends us. We should absorb it if we can. But if I have offended someone or if his offense is such that I can't relate to him without clearing it up, then I need to set aside the time to seek peace.

Say to the one you wronged, "God has shown me how wrong I was to [name the offense]. I want to live in a way that pleases Him. I've come to ask, 'Will you forgive me?'" If someone else has wronged you, be careful not to accuse or attack them, but seek to restore them in a spirit of gentleness, remembering that you, too, are a sinner (Gal. 6:1). Thus, to do good in our walk, we must turn from evil (selfishness) and pursue peace.

B. Doing good in our walk is defined by five attitudes and actions.

Peter mentions five character qualities (3:8):

Harmonious—A harmonious person seeks to get along with others. He is not self-willed, demanding his own way, and judging those who don't go along with him. He is a team player who considers the other person's perspective and gives others room to be different. He accepts people as Christ accepts them. He knows the difference between biblical absolutes, which must not be compromised, and gray areas, where there is latitude for difference. He gives people time to grow, realizing that it is a process. In the words of Augustine, "On essentials, unity; on non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

The only way that it's possible for people with different backgrounds, personalities and ways of thinking to be harmonious is to be committed to growing in obedience to God's Word. That's one reason why it's crucial for people entering into marriage to base their relationship on a common commitment to God and His Word. God's Word then is the basis for authority and direction in the marriage. Both partners are seeking to conform their lives to the Word of God. Thus they are on the same team, with the same outlook and interests. Mutual submission to God and His Word is crucial for harmony, whether in the home or in the church.

Sympathetic—"affected by like feelings." Our Savior is one who sympathizes with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15) and so we are to enter into what others are feeling. We are to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15). We are to allow the sufferings of others to touch our emotions. We are to be sensitive to how we would feel if we were in the other person's place. We should do all we can to make him or her feel accepted and loved. God made us all with emotions, and healthy relationships must take into account others' feelings.

Brotherly—The Greek word is "philadelphoi," brotherly love. It points to the fact that as believers we are members of the same family. But we must also show brotherly love to those outside the family of God, since we're all members of the human family (Acts 17:28). Often an opportunity to be brotherly toward another person opens the door for witness about our Lord Jesus Christ.

Kindhearted—"tenderhearted, compassionate." In the New Testament it is used only here and Ephesians 4:32. The root word means "bowels." The idea is to have deep inward feelings and genuine concern for the other person. I don't know if there is any distinction between it and "sympathetic." But both words have an emotional element that shows us that Christian behavior must go beyond cold duty. Others should sense that we genuinely care for them from our hearts.

Humble in spirit—"lowliness of mind." Jesus described Himself as "humble in heart" (Matt. 11:29, using a cognate word). This quality was not seen as a virtue by pagan writers in Bible times. It was

Christians who elevated it as a virtue. In our day, Christian writers seem to have reverted to the pagan ways, since almost every book dealing with relationships says that you must learn to love yourself and boost your self-esteem before you can love others. But the Bible clearly teaches that we must lower, not raise, our estimate of ourselves if we want harmonious relationships (Phil. 2:3).

Did you know that there is not one verse in the entire Bible that commands us to love ourselves? There are several verses that affirm that we do love ourselves and that command us to love others as much as we do in fact love ourselves. There aren't any verses that say that low self-esteem is the source of relational problems and that the solution is to raise our self-esteem. But there are many verses that say that selfishness and pride (thinking too highly of ourselves) are sources of our conflicts, and that we must esteem others more highly than ourselves (see Phil. 2:1-5; James 4:1-3; 1 Pet. 5:5). And yet Christian counselors are telling us that our relational problems would be solved if we'd just work on our self-esteem! The Bible says, "Work on your humility."

Thus the good life results from healthy relationships which result from doing good in our walk: turning from evil and seeking peace; and developing these Christlike character qualities.

2. The good life results from healthy relationships which result from doing good in our talk.

Do you want the good life? Peter says (3:10b), "Refrain [lit., "stop"] your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile [deception]." Our lips must back up the good deeds in our lives if we want to enjoy the good life. Peter brings out three aspects to doing good in our talk:

A. Doing good in our talk means not retaliating when we are verbally abused.

Verse 10 (from Psalm 34) supports Peter's command in 3:9, that we are not to retaliate when we are insulted, but rather to give a blessing instead, which means to speak well to the other person or to bring good to them. This principle runs counter to the world (and to much of the advice being given in the Christian world). The world says,

“If someone abuses you verbally, you don’t have to take it! Stand up for your rights! Assert yourself! Let them know that you have more self-respect than that!” But God says, “If someone insults you, bless them. Say something kind to them in return.” Jesus said, “Bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:28). I know it’s not easy, but it’s what God commands.

We’re not talking here about clarifying misunderstandings through conversation. There are proper times to state your point of view and speak the truth in a calm manner. What we’re looking at here is when a person is being purposely abusive toward you. He’s trying to pick a fight or bait you. Peter says, “Don’t respond to such abuse with more abuse. Don’t top his put down of you with a better put down of him. Don’t counter his name-calling by calling him names. Don’t retort to his sarcasm with more sarcasm. Don’t react to his attack by attacking him. Instead, respond with kind words.”

B. Doing good in our talk means refraining from deception.

Peter says that we should stop our lips from speaking guile (3:10b). The word was used by Homer to mean “bait” or “snare.” It refers to anything calculated to deceive, mislead or distort the facts. Deception is a barrier to communication and healthy relationships, since it destroys trust. It may be a deliberate attempt to bend the facts to suit your side of the story. Or perhaps you don’t mention certain facts so that the other person gets a skewed view of what really happened. It may be telling a person one thing to his face, but saying another thing behind his back. That way, people side with you against the person you are slandering. It may be exaggeration: “You (or he) *always* ...” “You (or he) *never* ...”

I realize that there are difficult situations where it is hard to be honest. Do you tell a dying relative the truth about his condition? Or, in a not so serious, but just as tough situation, what do you tell your wife when she asks, “Do you like my new hairdo?” You pray for tact and wisdom at such moments. But I argue that truthfulness is always the best policy. Deception hurts healthy relationships and doesn’t please God.

Thus, negatively, doing good in our talk means not retaliating and not deceiving. Positively,

- C. Doing good in our talk means blessing others with words that build up.

We are to speak well of others and to others (“giving a blessing”). As Paul puts it, we are to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). We are to speak words which build up, not which tear down. “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Eph. 4:29). “So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another” (Rom. 14:19).

If we would apply this in our homes—not trading insults, not deceiving, but speaking words that build up the other person—we would put marriage and family counselors out of business. Think about your speech in your family this past week. How much of it was sarcastic, critical, angry, accusatory? And how much was aimed at blessing and building up your family members?

You may protest, “We just kid each other with humorous gibes back and forth!” But I contend that trading put-downs, no matter how much in jest, does not build up the other person. When I was in college, I met each week for dinner and a discipleship time with a group of guys. Much of our time was spent bantering back and forth with funny comments to make the other guy look bad. One night a new Christian in the group confronted us by saying, “Hey, guys, this chopping each other down is sin!” We all protested at first, but he stuck to his guns until we realized that he was right. We weren’t blessing and building each other up. We had to repent.

Conclusion

Some might be thinking, “Now wait a minute. You’ve been talking about denying myself, laying down my rights, not retaliating, blessing those who insult me, being harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble. But it’s a dog-eat-dog world out there! If you knew my husband (or wife or boss or roommates), you’d know that if I

really did that, I'd get trampled! Who's going to look out for my rights? Who's going to protect me if I act like that?"

Peter adds verse 12 to show you: God will! His eyes are on the righteous. His ears attend to their prayer. But His face is against those who do evil. Our responsibility is to please the Lord by doing good in our walk and talk. He is responsible to protect us and to answer our prayers.

Barbara Bush spoke at the Wellesley College commencement a couple of years ago. She said,

As important as your obligation as a doctor, a lawyer or a business leader will be, you are a human being first, and those human connections with spouses, with children, with friends are the most important investments you will ever make. At the end of your life, you will never regret not having passed one more test, winning one more verdict, closing one more deal. You will regret time not spent with a husband, a child, a friend or a parent. Our success as a society depends not on what happens in the White House but on what happens inside your house. (*Reader's Digest* [1/91], pp. 157-158.)

She's right! Healthy relationships are at the core of the good life. They are essential if we want to glorify God and enjoy His blessings. I know of no other Scripture that would do more good for our relationships in our families and in our church than 1 Peter 3:8-12. I ask you to commit it to memory and take whatever steps necessary to apply it to your relationships. That's how to live the good life!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is excessive verbal abuse grounds for marital separation or divorce? Defend your answer biblically.
2. Is there a place in Christian relationships for "a good argument"? Why/why not?
3. Agree/disagree: Selfishness is the root of most relational problems?
4. Is honesty *always* the best policy? Defend biblically.

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