

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fifth Sunday After Easter, May 5, 2024

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 207:1-5, 417:1-2, 421, 400, 412.

Lessons: Psalm 34, 1 Peter 2:1–17, Luke 10:25-37.

Sermon Text: 1 Peter 3:8-18.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

As you study Luther’s Small Catechism you learn that “love God and love your neighbor” is the simplest summary of God’s Law. When he was asked a question, ***“Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”*** (Matthew 22:37–39, NIV84)

In the first and second chapters of his first letter, Peter has some very practical instruction for holy, sanctified living. And what believer doesn’t need reminders about living Christian lives? When you read this letter, you will find six kinds of relationships in which believers are encouraged and admonished to lead God-pleasing lives. Our text begins with the last of those six, our lives and relationships with fellow believers. Today we talk about

AN ADMONITION TO HOLY LIVING

1. ***“Live in harmony with one another.”***
2. **We see the actions that follow the heart of the Christian.**

Before we talk about holy living let’s remember why it is even possible. What is the foundation for doing things that please God, that show your love for God and your neighbor? Scripture is very clear with the answer. ***“Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit.”***

The example of Christ is valuable to Christians because he suffered and died, the totally innocent, the Sinless One who took upon himself the sins of all mankind. Christ’s death atoned for the transgressions of all men. His vicarious suffering reconciled all men to God. In this way he brought us to God and made it possible for us to become partakers of the glory of God and to begin to love God and our fellow man.

Our text today starts with the words ***“Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.”*** This is especially talking to Christian brothers and sisters. God says ***“live in harmony”***, live in unity of spirit. This is not to be just outwardly getting along with people, but it starts with attitudes of oneness in your minds and hearts.

Peter is speaking of relationships with our fellow believers. The sin-sickness in our hearts leads to all kinds of wickedness in Christian congregations: quarreling, coldness, resentment, pride, control obsession, turf protection, and the desire for revenge. The sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit changes those attitudes, and Peter urges his Christian readers to let the Holy Spirit work in their relationships with fellow Christians:

Let God guide you as you seek harmony. This is the conscious decision to work together with people, to suppress one’s own ego and desires and choose to adapt to others’ needs and wants.

The next word is sympathy – the conscious decision to be interested in someone else’s problems instead of just your own.

We also see an admonition to love. That includes the conscious decision to be willing to go out of your way and give of yourself in order to bring good things to someone else.

We see the word compassion, which includes the conscious decision to open up your heart and feelings to another's pain and trouble, to be tender and merciful with people.

God also encourages humility and gentleness. These relate to the conscious decision to think less of yourself and more of other people and the conscious decision to put away all thoughts of revenge and instead speak words and actions that are kind.

When Christians show these kinds of Christian characteristics, joy increases, unbelieving friends are drawn closer and find God's message believable, and God is honored.

Peter then quotes from Psalm 34. ***"Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."***

He makes the point that by their actions believers have a tremendous influence on the quality of their lives. For an example of that, God had Moses tell the Israelites this when they honored their parents: ***"so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land."*** (Deuteronomy 5:16, NIV84) In other words, God would increase the quality and beneficial quantity of their lives.

Peter wants his readers to know that this is reality. The choices that the believers make will determine whether they love life and see good days or whether the face of the Lord would be against them. Psalm 34 shows over and over this cause-and-effect relationship.

Then Peter becomes specific ***"Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."***

People being people, the world being the world, and even Christians having their sinful flesh, this implies that we will be insulted, reviled, slandered. And this even happens between confessing Christians. But do not repay evil with evil. Lots of people will want to do evil to you and to insult you. But even if you suffer for doing good, for obedience to God's laws and man's laws, for righteousness, you will be blessed. ***"It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil."***

"But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened." Don't be afraid of those who persecute you. Remember that Jesus himself told us ***"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of [God,] the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."*** (Matthew 10:28, NIV84)

Peter says, ***"in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord."*** Again he emphasizes that it must start in the heart. He goes on: ***"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."*** You may even personally be aware of examples of how Godly, Christian behavior on your part leads to outward decency or civic righteousness on the part of others.

"In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil."

We see here a call to personal evangelism. This is the ultimate in loving one's enemies. What better way could there be of dealing with one's unbelieving neighbors, acquaintances and friends than to seek to give them eternal life too? Just as we want to be with our earthly friends in heaven, so we don't wish eternal damnation even on our enemies.

"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord." The selfish poisons of our sins inside of us spread from our sinful nature, and that sinful nature needs to be beat down each day. The New Man in you needs to reaffirm its faith every day. Every day we need to rededicate our life to the Lord, every day giving him honor and glory, every day praying for strength to stand up for the truth, every day listening to the Savior's voice through his wonderful Word. And when your own heart is full of gratitude for being rescued from death and hell, you will be anxious to speak, and your speech will have conviction.

“Be prepared.” As you look into the future, you know that you will have opportunities to share your faith. Think about what you might say. Can you summarize the Christian faith in a few sentences?

Here is a simple four-keyword summary of the Bible’s law and gospel message that you can keep in mind to help organize all the Bible facts you know: **Sin. Grace. Faith. Deeds.**

Sin. You can simply tell people how we are separated at birth from our Creator, that no human being can lift himself up to God’s standards of holiness, that all people by nature are under God’s curse.

Grace. You can then tell people that God loves us anyway, that he sent his Son to take on human flesh like ours to live and die and rise from the dead in our place and that God pronounced the world not guilty because of Jesus.

Faith. Tell people that all of these good things: forgiveness, peace, life forever come from God into our lives personally as we believe in God’s wonderful promises. The power and ability to believe are gifts that come from God through his Word and the sacraments.

Deeds. Although deeds or works do not save us, the Spirit of God who comes to live in believers now enables them to live for God. Believers see God’s ways as a delight and find joy in conforming their will to his will. Deeds, good works, truly good works, are fruits of faith.

Sin. Grace. Faith. Deeds.

“Give the reason for the hope that you have.” When you talk to people, you don’t have to argue with them, or try to make the perfect sales pitch, or try to make God’s ways logical or reasonable. You don’t have to be clever, or take the burden of converting them on yourself. Just tell the truth. Just tell what happened in God’s plan of salvation, and tell how you know these things – the Bible tells me so. Just help people find the Bible’s message for themselves and let loose the power of the Holy Spirit. The reason for hope is the Bible!

“Be gentle.” No one appreciates aggressive evangelism. Nobody can stand someone who talks all the time. When you listen, ask questions. This can lead to your answers, pointing them to the Word of God.

“Show respect.” Nobody can stand an evangelist who puffs up his own denomination by ridiculing other Christian groups. A first conversation with a fallen-away Christian or non-Christian is not necessarily the time and place for careful discussion of issues of disagreement among Christian church groups. People will be more inclined to open up to your message if they feel respected. It is important to lift up Jesus Christ, not yourself.

So now what? What is your life going to be like for the rest of this day? What is your life going to be like tomorrow?

How can you show love for God and love for your fellow men? God gives us one day at a time. May we live each day praising God in our hearts, with our words, and with our lives, so that others, too, may see Jesus Christ and believe! Amen.