



ELECT EXILES – 1 PETER
BLESS TO OBTAIN A BLESSING
1 Peter 3:8-12
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⁸Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. ¹⁰For

"Whoever desires to love life
and see good days,
let him keep his tongue from evil
and his lips from speaking deceit;
¹¹let him turn away from evil and do good;
let him seek peace and pursue it.
¹²For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

Introduction – The Creative Weapon of Love

It was a Monday evening, January 30, 1956, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was speaking to a large crowd at First Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The Montgomery bus boycott, which was the first significant step in the civil rights movement, was at this point well underway.

Not far from where Dr. King was speaking was his home, where his wife, Coretta, and their baby were spending a quiet evening; that is, until someone tossed a fire bomb onto their front porch, hoping to burn their house down and kill the emerging civil rights leader and his family.

King quickly received news of what had happened and rushed to his home. When he arrived, he saw a gang of white police gathered in the yard, together with a large crowd of blacks. King says he could tell the blacks were agitated, rightfully so; he also says he noticed many were armed with weapons; so, as he went inside he worried whether his nonviolent resistance movement was itself about to go up in flames.

Inside, he found mother and child rattled but unharmed. Yet after comforting them, he knew he had to go outside and address the growing and increasingly angry crowd, lest something far worse unfold. Standing on the porch, he then addressed the crowd with these words:

We believe in law and order. Don't get panicky. Don't do anything panicky at all. Don't get your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is what God said. We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them.

Truly remarkable words in a moment like that. A call not to repay evil for evil, but instead to bless; a call to express love rather than hatred. Dr. King says he learned the method of loving one's enemies from Jesus of Nazareth and his teaching on the Sermon on the Mount. King called it *the creative weapon of love*.¹ And it was this creative weapon of love that caused a little trickle of resistance in Montgomery to turn into the mighty river we now in retrospect call the American Civil Rights movement.

But Dr. King was, of course, not the only one to draw upon the teaching of Jesus to help people in the midst of hard times. In today's passage, we see the Apostle Peter place a similar call before his listeners, and therefore before us as well: "Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing" (3:9).

The church of Jesus Christ, and every individual Christian who bears that name, has been called to bless even those who have harmed us. But what does it mean to bless? Does it mean you are to smile when someone smacks you in the face, and say something cordial or complimentary in return, like: "I really appreciate your fist in my face. Thank you so much for that. Have a great day. God bless you!" Is this what it means to bless those who revile or mistreat you?

To bless someone means to invoke God's presence in that person's life. It's a way of asking for *God* to work in a person's life for their good. Each night I try to bless my children before they go to sleep; what I am doing is simply asking God to work graciously in their lives. To bless someone is, then, to pray for that person: that God himself would bless the person. This is why Jesus talks about blessings others and praying for them in the same breath: "bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:28). So to bless our enemies or bless those who have harmed us is to pray for nothing less than that God would work in a redemptive and saving way in that person's life.

But let us shoot straight for a moment. As anyone knows who has been reviled or maligned, it is not easy to respond with the creative weapon of love, is it? You may not have received a firebomb on your front porch, but you know that even a harsh word against you can light the fire of revenge in your soul.

How, then, is it possible to respond to hurt with blessing rather than cursing? How can we fully embrace this call of Scripture on our lives? We can only do so because, if you are a Christian, God has already placed *several other calls* on your life. What are these other calls that enable or equip us to bless others, even those who harm us?

¹ *Autobiography*, p. 67.

Called To New Life Through New Birth

First of all, we're called to bless others because *God has called us to new life through new birth*.

Let's face it: to bless even those who have harmed us requires a strength none of us naturally have. What we need is a supernatural strength that no one is born with. It is a strength that only comes from God doing something in you, implanting new power within you. And this is what he does by calling you to new life and causing you to be born again.

You see, God's first call on your life as a Christian is the call of conversion, the call to new life through new birth. God calls you to himself by causing you to be born again. This is what Peter celebrates at the start of his letter: "Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope" (1:3).

When God calls you to himself and causes you to be born again, he begins healing you of all those old tendencies that tempt you to want to retaliate when wronged. Remember what Peter says of Jesus' death for us: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed" (2:24).

But more than that: by calling you to new life through new birth, God not only heals you of the desire to retaliate, he empowers you to live a life that blesses even your enemies. And he does so by implanting within you a seed, a new supernatural presence and power—*His presence and His power*. "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1:22-23).

By being born again, you are enabled to do something truly supernatural: to not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, to bless. So do not doubt whether it's possible, or despair of not being able to do this. Instead, lean into the reality of your new life in Christ and the love of God that has been shed abroad in your heart through the gospel. If you have been born again, you have been crucified with Christ, and you no longer live, but Christ lives in you. Let Christ, then, live out his life in and through you.

Called To Priestly Service to the World

There is a second reason why we are called to bless even those who harm us, and it's directly related to another call God has placed on our lives. We bless even those who have hurt us, rather than curse them, because *God has called us to a priestly service to the world*.

God's call on our lives gives us a new identity and a new vocation in the world. Peter describes this earlier: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (2:9). That is a summary of who we are by virtue of God's call on our lives: we have been called to a priestly service to the world. And, of course, one of the main things a priest does in service to the world is *to bless* the world.

Some of you may have seen the movie, *The Mission*, with Robert Deniro, and may recall the powerful closing scene of the movie. The colonialists march into the village to attack the mission. They are met by an unarmed priest, Father Gabriel, and the others of the village, who resolve to face enemy gunfire without retaliation or even defense. Instead, as the chapel goes

up in flames behind them, all they have is the cross of Christ as they move forward to face enemy fire and embrace their own death.

It's a picture of the kind of priestly service God calls his church to. Not to repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, to bless. For this is who we are as God's royal priesthood in the world.

Called To Follow In the Footsteps of Jesus

Third, we are called to bless even those who hurt us because *God has called us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus*.

When God calls you and me to himself, he calls you to a life of discipleship, a life of learning from and following after Jesus. We are called to imitate Jesus; our lives are to look like his life; we are to respond to things the way he did.

How did Jesus respond when he suffered and was reviled? What did he say or what did he do in response to the rulers who scoffed at him as he hung from the cross, or the soldiers who mocked him in his helplessness, or even the criminals who railed against him for getting himself in their same predicament? Peter tells us:

He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly (2:22-23).

But more than that: not only did Jesus not revile in return—*he blessed*. As he hung on the cross he blessed even the mockers with these words, with this prayer: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

So, as those who bear the name of Christ, we are to follow in Jesus' footsteps and do likewise. “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (2:21). We are to take up our own cross and follow him, the cross of unjust suffering and shame. After all, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer has said, “How will our preaching of the passion of Jesus Christ become visible and credible to the world if the disciples avoid this passion for themselves, if they despise it in their own bodies?”²

To share in his sufferings, to participate in the unjust humiliation of the cross itself, this is what it means to follow Jesus. We are called to bless others even when we have been harmed by them, because we have been called into discipleship, we have been called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth.

Called To Eternal Glory in Christ

Fourthly and finally, we are called to bless even those who harm us because *God has called to eternal glory in Christ*; we have been called to a blessed hope and a glorious future in Him. Not one of death or despair or destruction, but one of ever-increasing and indeed unceasing blessing for all eternity. As Peter says, you are called to bless others, “that you may obtain a blessing” (3:9).

² *Discipleship*, p. 136-37.

What is this blessing we will one day obtain? It is God's final and decisive blessing; it is God's climactic good word to us—not because of who we are in ourselves, but because of who we are in his Son. Peter is here pointing us to the future, to the Last Day, when God will vindicate his own people and crown their lives with “praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:7).

So we can endure evil without retaliation or reviling without malicious response in this life precisely because our hope is set on the future. There is no need for vindicating or justifying ourselves in the present. “It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Rom. 8:34). He is defending your cause; you do not need to do it for yourself. He is looking after your reputation; you do not need to fret over it yourself. And he is safeguarding your integrity, your honor, your very life; you therefore do not need to yourself.

Instead, you and I can rest in the confidence that even though we may be treated unjustly, or falsely accused, in this life, there will come a day when God himself will set the record straight. So we can stand firm in our faith, confident that “after we have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called [us] to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish [us]” (5:10).

Conclusion – Putting To Death the Potential Peter in Us All

As you may know, while Dr. King had great respect for Malcolm X as an individual and a leader, he disagreed strongly with his political views and methods. He did not think the retaliation and violence Malcolm X advocated was ultimately right in principle or in practice. Listen to King's comments as he reflected on Malcolm X's assassination:

The assassination of Malcolm X was an unfortunate tragedy. Let us learn from this tragic nightmare that violence and hate only breed violence and hate, and that Jesus' word still goes out to every potential Peter, “Put up thy sword.”³

How true it is, as King has put it, that there is a ‘potential Peter’ in every one of us. When wronged, we instinctively reach, not for the creative weapon of love, but for the sword. And instead of blessing our enemies and praying for them, we want to lop off an ear—or something worse.

But this passage calls us to something different. And so let me offer in conclusion just two practical suggestions to help you deal with the ‘potential Peter’ in your own heart.

First, fight bitterness by taking it to the foot of the cross. Bitterness is a natural response to being mistreated. But it can, if left unchecked, fester and become deadly. Bitterness is cancerous. And part of what makes bitterness so dangerous is it's so subtle; we do not usually know it's there until it's too late and we have already exploded in anger all over someone who has wronged us.

So ask yourself this question: How would I feel if I accidentally bumped into the person who has wronged you at the store? Would I feel a sense of calm and even compassion, or a sense of edginess and even anger? If there is bitterness in your heart toward that person, you will not

³ *Autobiography*, p. 268.

feel a sense of calm or compassion. And if there is bitterness in your heart, you need to return to the foot of the cross and there lay it down.

There is no place for bitterness at the foot of the cross. You cannot see the sinless Son of God in the face, as he hangs from the Roman executioner's stake, and still harbor bitterness in your heart over some injustice you have suffered. Nothing compares to the injustice Jesus himself suffered—and this injustice was to forgive you for all the injustices you and I have committed against his Father: all the times you reviled God with your unbelief, all the times you mocked or slandered God with your expressions of doubt. There can be no bitterness at the foot of the cross, so take your bitterness there and let Christ deal with it—and with you.

Second, pray specifically and by name for those who have hurt you either by what they have done to you or said about you. Who is on your prayer list? Presumably, you pray for yourself, your family, your friends, the ministry of the church, missionaries and others serving Christ. But do you pray for your enemies, or those who have done you wrong? I think we often pray *against* our enemies. But do we pray *for* them?

I must tell you that in light of this week's passage, I have had to add several names to my prayer list, names of individuals who have done me evil and not good. What I realized is that if I have only come to terms with what has been done to me, and let go of the bitterness and guarded my tongue from slandering someone in return, then I have only gone half-way. This passage calls me to something even more: not just silence about, but prayer for those who have harmed you.

Who do you, then, need to add to your prayer list? Who has hurt you or spoken something untrue about you, or spread a nasty rumor about you, or sought to discredit you in the eyes of others? God calls you to bless them and to pray for them.

Remember: not repaying evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but instead blessing, this is nothing other than *showing mercy* to someone who does not deserve it. But that is precisely who we are: those who have been shown mercy when we did not deserve it. Let us, then, not forget this life-changing fact about who we are in Christ: "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (2:10).

Have you personally received God's mercy in Christ Jesus? He holds it out to you, to every one of us, to receive freely by faith today.

God has given us every spiritual blessing in Christ. We are called to new life through new birth, to priestly service to the world, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, and to an eternal glory and final vindication. In light of these great calls on our lives, may we step out into the world with confidence and hope, resolved to bless others just as we have been blessed by God himself.

Amen.