

Be a blessing to the world

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Preacher: Brian King

[0 : 00] Let's pray. Let's ask God for his help. Father, we thank you again that you are a God who speaks to us, so we pray that you would speak to us today through 1 Peter 3.

We pray, Lord, that as we consider what you have to say to us, we would know better how to glorify you, how to seek you this year, and indeed that it would implant your word in us and help us to have hearts that believe.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Now, sometimes Christians can feel under siege. We can feel under siege politically, although perhaps right now that is not the case in Sarawak.

But we are aware that there have been times when certain politicians have said inflammatory things, and of course to this day the Raymond Call saga has never been properly resolved.

We can also feel under siege culturally. Increasingly, on matters of sexuality, we are seen as out of step with modern times, hence one reason why we had all those recent January seminars.

[1 : 08] And as an aside, do come and talk to me about how you'll find them if you came later on.

We know, of course, that around the world, Christians are under siege literally.

In places like Nigeria and Burkina Faso, Christians suffer recurring acts of violence against them, whereas in China, artificial intelligence and facial recognition technology is increasingly deployed to suppress Christians.

And perhaps today there are a couple of you who have felt under siege personally. Because you have chosen to follow Jesus Christ, you have been criticised by your parents, or you've been overlooked for promotion, or sidelined by some of your friends.

So, how should we respond? If we find ourselves under pressure more in 2024, whether personally or as a community, how do we glorify God?

There might be some among us who feel that we need to be more assertive. We cannot let God look weak and let people walk all over us. Our voice should not be muzzled, but instead we must fulfil the prophetic calling of the Church to speak truth to power.

[2 : 27] We have to stand for truth. Now, there is a place for bold and firm declarations. You can find strong words in the Bible.

Think, for example, of Jesus pronouncing woes on the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum for their unbelief in Matthew 11.

In the Bible, depending on who is being addressed at that particular moment, you can find strong language.

Wolves need to be kept away. Fools need to be corrected. The disruptive need to be admonished. But that does not sum up the entirety of the Bible's approach.

Because in today's passage, we'll see that if we want to glorify God, there is a calling we have that we cannot ignore. You see, no matter our circumstances, whether we are well regarded at the moment or feeling under siege, whether we are at peace or under pressure, we are called to be a blessing to the world.

[3 : 43] A blessing to the world. And 1 Peter 3 verse 8 to 17 today will give us the specifics of what that looks like.

But first, let's set the context. Peter is writing to Christians who are increasingly feeling the pressure. 1 Peter 1 verse 6 tells us that they are facing all kinds of trials.

And places like 4 verse 19 and 5 verse 9 make reference to their sufferings. Now at this point, it probably hasn't gotten to the point of mass arrest or martyrdom yet.

So what is going on instead? In 2 verse 12, we're told Christians are sometimes accused of wrongdoing. In 2 verse 15, there's lots of malicious gossip going around about what Christians are up to.

In 4 verse 4 and 14, they are being verbally abused and slandered. So there is plenty of suspicion and slander. Now, isn't that where the Christian community in Malaysia sometimes find themselves?

[4 : 52] And so the temptation is to give up or at least just lay low and go under the radar for a while? Or the temptation is to become more like the world in the hope that they will decrease their attacks?

And that is why Peter wants to encourage the Christians. He writes 5 verse 12 to encourage them to stand firm in Christ.

He wants them to hold fast to his grace. But how are they to stand firm? The key verses are actually 1 Peter 2 verse 11 to 12.

Now let me read them to you, those verses. Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to abstain from sinful desires which wage war against your soul.

Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

[5 : 58] So Peter says here are two ways to stand firm. Number one, fight sin. Abstain from sinful desires. Keep it from killing you.

Why? Because we don't belong here. We are foreigners and exiles. So sin is foreign to us.

We need to keep it at arm's length. But this leads us to the second way to stand firm. Number two, live good lives in this world.

In other words, keep sin at arm's length but don't keep your fellow sinners at arm's length. No, be with them.

Doing good. And this is the second way that Peter wants to unpack for us now in our passage this morning.

[6 : 58] Listen up, he says. Whether you are young or old, male or female, Jew or Gentile, if you are a Christian today, here is our calling.

Verse 9. We are called to bless. We are called to bless. Not just called to bless God, mind you, although that's what Peter does at the very beginning of this letter.

Not just called to bless those who like us, but called to bless even those who persecute us. We are to bless the ungodly ruler, the unjust employer, the unbelieving husband.

Now, most of us are probably familiar with the phrase the Midas touch. That, of course, references the Greek myth where everything the king touches turns into gold.

And now we use that phrase positively to refer to someone who seems to be able to turn everything he does into a success. Well, we can say that we are called to have the one Peter touch.

[8 : 11] Whatever we do, whatever we touch, whatever we are involved in, we try to turn it into a blessing to others, even those who curse us.

But for us to fulfill that calling, Peter says, we must start at home. That is, if we want to bless the world, we must learn to bless others in church first.

And that's why he starts not with verse 9, but with verse 8. Finally, all of you be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.

You see, what happens when we are under pressure? That's often when the worst parts of our personality come out. And we tend to lash out at those closest to us.

It's hard to be loving when you are suffering, hard to be unselfish when you are in pain, as I'm sure the Christians during Peter's time are.

[9 : 27] But Peter says, remember what church is? I told you back in chapter 2. We are all bricks of the same living temple.

We are citizens of the same holy nation. We are a family with the same heavenly father. We are a community where the natural divisions of the world.

Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra, Israelis and Palestinians, South Koreans and North Koreans have been overcome. And if we claim to be all these things, the church should therefore not be a place where Christians face the same kind of insults and hostility as they would outside the church.

Instead, it should be a place where Christians seek to bless one another. In verse 8, Peter names five ways to put that into practice.

But the heart of it is really the middle one, to love one another. Actually, the way that the older NIV translates it captures the idea even better.

[10 : 47] it is to love as brothers. So, how do you love each other as brothers and sisters?

Well, first of all, you'll be like-minded. Now, not like-minded on which football team you support, condolences to Liverpool fans, or what musical taste you have, or what your political affiliation is. but to be on the same page when it comes to pursuing Christ, to have the same goal in wanting to glorify him in everything, in wanting to obey him and achieve his agenda.

What a blessing it is, isn't it, when everyone in church is pulling in the same direction, rather than four different ones. And what a blessing it is to know that you have an ally walking with you, urging you on to follow Jesus when the world is pushing you in the other direction.

And secondly, when you are sympathetic towards your brother and sister in Christ who is under pressure, you are blessing them. To be sympathetic is to have that sense of suffering with another person, to enter into their experience, to share their joy, or lessen their sorrow.

[12:21] As Paul says elsewhere, rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn. Now, that's not necessarily to say that when someone is crying uncontrollably in front of you, you must do the same.

But you bless the person with your willingness to imagine what it's like to be in their shoes, while at the same time remaining yourself, so that you can offer the care that they can't manage for themselves in that moment.

And that requires, third of all, compassion. It's to be tender-hearted, to be ready to be moved by the troubles of others.

Again, if you are under pressure, how encouraging it is, isn't it, to know that your brother or sister in Christ isn't just ignoring you, but is concerned for you.

Knowing someone is paying attention to you in your tough times is a blessing in itself. What a way to bless one another.

[13:38] And then there is the need to be humble. Now, this isn't a deliberate attempt to criticize yourself, to say, oh, I'm no good at this or that, but it is a willingness to serve the other person, even if that service itself goes unnoticed or it's inconvenient, it's a willingness to put the other person's interests first.

So, imagine a community whereby everyone is doing all these verse eight things. Would you not feel blessed? And would you not feel privileged that you can make someone feel blessed in that way?

Now, just imagine a world where the opposite of verse eight is being practiced. Imagine how it would be like if everyone, instead of being like-minded, was hell-bent on pursuing their own individual paths regardless of who gets in the way.

Imagine if everyone, instead of being sympathetic, was apathetic instead. They're completely unwilling to be charitable in their opinions or views.

Imagine if everyone was harsh and hardened their hearts to the needs of others such that when they look at the tough time that you're going through, they feel absolutely nothing.

[15:11] And imagine if everyone overestimated themselves and put their noses up at you. and the truth is, you don't actually have to imagine because that is what many people's real-life experience of the world is like.

That's what so many people out there go through. But the church is to be different. It's meant to be an alternate world.

It's meant to put verse 8 on display because that way we are putting God's blessing on display. And if I can put it like this, in one sense, verse 8 is meant to be a dress we hustle.

We bless like this inside the church to help us practice blessing like this out in the world. Because if we can't bless others like this in church, then how can we hope to bless others in the world?

And that's why the calling to be a blessing starts at home, in the church. Sympathy, compassion and humility, forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation must be offered in the church if it is to be offered in the world.

[16:49] But having said that, verse 9 tells us our calling does extend to the world. We are to be a blessing to the world even when it is hostile to us.

do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing because to this you were caught.

You see, if Christians did repay evil with evil or insult with insult, in what sense are we different from the world? Now, of course, it's important that we recognize Peter isn't attempting to cover every possible situation.

So this is not, for instance, an instruction to someone experiencing domestic violence not to get out and go to the police. It is not saying that we don't care about injustice.

But Peter is talking about following in the way of Jesus. For consider Jesus was betrayed by one of his closest followers, was unjustly accused by the religious leaders, was mocked by the guards and even criminals as he hung there on the cross.

[18:14] And Jesus, surveying all that has happened to him, still prays, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

Then consider one of the first followers of Jesus, Stephen. As he is stoned for preaching Jesus fearlessly, he prays to God, do not hold this sin against them.

Now how amazing is that? God, but that is our calling. We bless the world, even those who mistreat us because we follow Christ.

Notice what we are being asked to do. We are not just to refrain from retaliation. We are not to just do nothing and be passive.

Rather, we are to actively bless them. That means we wish good things for them and we want to work for their good.

[19:24] Let me share with you a story I have heard about St. John's Church in Vancouver, which, if I got it correct, is where the late great theologian J.I.

Packer used to attend. Now, this Anglican Church had been fighting a battle in their denomination in Canada, taking a stand for truth against their liberal bishop, who had been doing things such as teaching against the uniqueness of Christ and blessing marriages of same-sex couples.

As a result, they felt that they had to leave their denomination, but they hoped to keep their building, arguing that it rightfully belonged to their parish.

However, a court order said that the diocese, the denomination, could seize the building, and so they had to vacate. And this was tough on them because this had been their home for a hundred years.

They had spent lots of money on the upkeep. It was the place where many people in the congregation had been baptised and gotten married. And so as they left, what would have been easy for them to do?

[20:40] Since they were leaving it in the hands of a theologically liberal group, it would have been easy for them not to bother anymore with the building, or if they were feeling particularly spiteful, take as many things away from the building as possible, just make life difficult for the incoming group.

But the congregation instead decided to have a gotong royong. They made sure that the place was kept in the best condition possible, you know, make sure that it's clean, the facilities are still in tip-top shape, that kind of stuff.

When the inspection came, there was a building inspection of some sort, they inspected the building, they were like, wow, everything is in such good order. You see, they decided that they would still bless their next tenants even if they were on opposing sites.

But why? What was their reason? What's the motivation for us to do the same? Well, look at the end of verse 9, and we find the basis because the Lord's blessing is on us.

Peter says, to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. Now, Peter isn't saying that you bless in order to become a Christian.

[22:07] Rather, he's saying, as you bless the world like this, you can be assured you are a Christian because you're walking the way of Jesus.

And that means you are walking towards your inheritance. That's why you bless. Because as you do so, you know the Lord's blessing is coming to you.

Peter then grounds this in scripture. In particular, he makes appeal to Psalm 34, our call to worship this morning.

In verses 10 to 12, we have a quotation from Psalm 34, verse 12 to 16, although now in the third rather than in the second person. But to get Peter's point, we must understand the psalm as a whole.

This psalm was written at a time when King David was under extreme pressure. He might have been anointed king, but at this point he's on the run from Saul who is looking to kill him.

[23:17] But David kept crying out and trusting the Lord, and indeed twice he had the opportunity to kill Saul himself.

Twice he found Saul and he could approach him while he was sleeping, but on both occasions he refused to take Saul's life out of obedience to God.

And on one of those occasions, when Saul discovered what David had done, he even said to David, you have repaid me good while I repaid you evil.

May the Lord repay you with good for what you have done. And this is why David says what he does in Psalm 34 verse 12 to 16 which Peter quotes.

But now Peter directly applies the logic of Psalm 34 to Christians today. As we choose not to speak evil or repay evil but do good as David himself did, we find verse 12 that the Lord's favour is on us. [24 : 39] We will enjoy the blessing of life and good days which in this context is probably eternal in nature. at the same time we're reminded that God's face has always been against those who do evil.

And because that is the case we are free to bless. We rest secure knowing justice will be done. It is in God's hands.

So we don't worry about that. We bless. Now of course that is not easy. And so Peter gives us further encouragement in verses 13 and 14.

Don't fear even when you suffer. Verse 13. Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? Now that makes it sound a little like Peter is saying, oh, if you are a person who does good, everyone will like you.

And maybe there is a grain of truth in that. I remember last year hearing about how the Vietnamese government, officially communists, actually looked with favour upon a particular Vietnamese denomination because they were doing such good work amongst drug addicts.

[26 : 07] But remember Peter's context. How would the Christians have answered verse 13 in Peter's day? They probably would have said, Emperor Nero.

You see, there are definitely those who will still harm even those doing good, as I believe Christians around the world can still testify to today. But Peter reinforces what he's been majoring on in verse 14.

But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. My friends, he says, if you are suffering right now, don't take this as a sign you are doing the wrong thing.

Don't take it as a sign of God's displeasure that you are somehow not glorifying him. It's actually the opposite. You do have God's favour on you when that happens.

You are blessed. Now, we find it hard to believe because so many people keep using the word blessed today to mean you are rich materially or you are very healthy or something like that.

[27 : 26] But do you remember how Jesus defined blessing? Here are his words from Matthew 5. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

You see, if we look to the Bible, rather than our own definitions, what does it mean to be blessed? It means belonging to God and having his favour.

So, if you are suffering precisely because you belong to God, it's a sign of your blessedness. It's a sign you are glorifying him.

And then he refers to another part of the Old Testament, Isaiah 8, verse 12. Do not fear their threats. Or as the footnote says, do not fear what they fear.

Do not be frightened. And Peter is very deliberate in quoting this verse. Now, at this point in Isaiah, God is telling Isaiah not to fear what the people fear.

[28 : 47] All sorts of conspiracies, those who are boasting in their military resources. And so, Isaiah 8, verse 12, on the screen, God says, do not call conspiracy everything these people call a conspiracy.

Do not fear what they fear and do not dread it. And instead, he goes on to say, verse 13, the Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy.

He is the one you are to fear. He is the one you are to dread. And Peter clearly knows verse 13, even if he doesn't quote it, because he is making the same point.

Don't fear even if you suffer, because the only person you need to fear is God. And when you fear God, or as verse 15 puts it, when you revere Christ as Lord, you need not fear anything else.

That's the logic. And again, that frees you to bless others however they treat you. And actually, as you do so, you open the door to one key benefit, the opportunity to speak of the ultimate blessing.

[30 : 16] blessing. There is a story told about the German composer Felix Mendelssohn. That's the guy who composed the wedding march.

That one. And he visited a cathedral once where he went unrecognised. And he saw an organ and he asked if he could play it.

At first, the church organist refused, but he eventually relented. And after a few minutes of absolutely beautiful music filling the air, the organist could not contain himself and asked, what is your name?

And of course, he replied, Mendelssohn. You see, what happens when you live a life of 1 Peter 3 verse 8 to 14?

what happens when you seek to bless no matter what? It will be like filling the world with beautiful music. The beautiful music of an attractive Christ-shaped life.

[31 : 29] And when that happens, God says there will be some people who cannot help but ask, what is this? Who is behind such a composition?

Now, of course, not everyone will ask that. Verse 14 makes that clear. But verse 15 assumes that as you go be a blessing in the way of 1 Peter 3 verse 8 to 14, some will ask you to give the reason for the hope you have.

Because how you live doesn't make sense to them. what the people at St. John's Church did, it doesn't make sense. Or what Pastor Eric Fitzgerald did, it doesn't make sense.

Now, what did this Pastor Eric do? Pastor Eric's wife and unborn daughter had been killed in a road accident by someone who had fallen asleep on the wheel.

But Pastor Eric chose to forgive this man, even pleaded for a lesser sentence for him, and began to give him meals.

[32 : 42] He blessed the one who wronged him. It doesn't make sense. But it can make sense once we bring the gospel into the picture.

The moment we speak of Jesus, who chose to love us, his enemies, even when we had no wish to be with him, the moment we speak of Jesus, who chose to die for us, the ungodly, even taking the punishment that was due us, it can make sense.

When we say, we do what we do because the one we follow did that for us, when we say we bless those who curse us, because the one we follow bless those who curse him, it starts making sense. And that's what we want to do for the world. we want to help them make sense of it all. But here's the thing, verse 15 again, we must always be prepared.

We must be ever ready. And so here's one really big way we glorify God in 2024. We can prepare ourselves to be ready to speak of the gospel as we do good in the world.

[34 : 28] Are we ready? I've been chatting with Greg, our evangelism deacon, and we are hoping to run some simple seminars sometime this year on how we can create evangelistic opportunities and make the best use of those opportunities to speak of Jesus.

So we'll try to get that going. But let's look to be ready. When it comes to speaking of Jesus as the hope that we have, Christians can never go on leave.

They are always on call. Now perhaps some of you, as you're hearing this, you're beginning to realise, I can't prepare myself because although I've been going to church for a while, I believe myself to be a Christian, I don't even know this hope that you're talking about.

You're describing a totally alien experience to me. And if that is you, then your preparation is a little bit different. You must start by getting to know this Jesus yourself first.

Will you do that? Come talk to me, any of the other leaders here? Because you can't be a blessing to the world without experiencing the blessing that Christ gives in the gospel first.

[35 : 53] And of course, we have no idea how people will respond when we speak of Jesus. We pray that they will respond positively. But however people respond, we speak of Jesus with gentleness and respect.

Actually, the word translated respect here is the same word as the word fear in verse 14. And so this is saying we speak with gentleness towards others and at the same time we speak because we fear God.

So how can we glorify God in 2024? We remember our calling to be a blessing to the world even to those who do bad to us.

We start in church and we keep blessing because we know the Lord's blessing is on us. And so we don't have to fear even when we suffer.

Instead, because we fear God, we live and pray for the opportunity to speak of the ultimate blessing, Jesus himself. Shall we pray then that this will be our posture?

[37 : 07] Let's do that now. Heavenly Father, we thank you again for your word from 1 Peter. and we just ask Lord that you will help us indeed to be this kind of blessing to others here in this church, but not just in this church, but also to our neighbors out there in the world.

Help us Lord, even when it's hard, even when people do not always treat us the way we like, perhaps they even insult us, and yet Lord, because we are your followers, we pray that we will still seek to bless them.

so give us what we need Lord, and give us every opportunity to speak of you, to give the reason for the hope that we have. We pray that even in the coming months, we will be able to fulfill that goal. We pray all this in the name of Jesus. Amen.