

Thought for the Week 3rd January 2021

READING 1 Peter 2: 11-25 (NIV) Living Godly Lives in a Pagan Society

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹² 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.

¹³ Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. ¹⁷ Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor.

¹⁸ Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. ¹⁹ For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. ²⁰ But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. ²¹ To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

²² "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."

²³ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." ²⁵ For "you were like sheep going astray," but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

There is a well-known story about Sir Winston Churchill and his parliamentary colleague Mrs Bessie Braddock (renowned for her very large frame and rather rugged looks). They were both overnight guests at a country house. During the evening Mr Churchill partook rather too much of some fine claret with his meal and finished off with a considerable amount of the after dinner brandy. As he made his way unsteadily to his bedroom, he encountered Mrs Braddock on the landing in her dressing gown and rollers. "Mr Churchill, you're drunk!" she said. "Mrs Braddock," he replied, "You're ugly! But in the morning I shall be sober!"

I'm sure there are things about us all that we would like to change. Research shows that there are very few people who are totally happy with the way they look - the size and shape of their bodies, their hair or whatever. And even more strangely, some of the most dissatisfied people are the ones with the figure and looks that others would love to have! Change is a multi-million pound industry – it's what the advertisers thrive on. You can't possibly do without trying our

product – it will make you look and feel years younger and you'll be far more attractive, or so they tell us. Health and diet books and magazines fill the shelves.

I'm sure that many would have to admit trying, and more often than not failing, to lose weight, or build up more muscle. Especially at the beginning of a new year we are often full of good intentions and enthusiasm, but eventually we find that "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak!" Now there is nothing wrong with trying to live a healthy lifestyle, do more exercise and eat a better diet, but whatever changes we may attempt or even succeed in making, they are small fry compared with the much bigger plans God has to change us. God's plan for us is not to tinker around with little things. What he intends is much greater than that. It's nothing short of total transformation!

God's plan and ultimate goal is to make us like his Son, Jesus Christ. Paul describes it in very theological terms in Romans 8:28-29: but Eugene Peterson paraphrase of it in *The Message* puts it across very clearly. *"We can be sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good. God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his son."*

"Shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his son." That's it, that's what God wants to do with you and me - make our lives become like that of Jesus. That's God's plan for you and me for 2021. But what does it mean in real terms for us to *"become like Jesus"*? Ultimately, in heaven, he will transform our lowly earthly bodies to be like Christ's glorious body, but what about the here and now? What are the implications of us as we begin a new year, and especially after the year we have just had – a year like no other in our experience. How does Christ want to change us in 2021?

Obviously, a good place to start is to see what Jesus said, and a scan through the New Testament turns up quite a few passages that give Jesus as an example for us to imitate.

For a start there's Mark 10:43-45 where Jesus says: *"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Or there's John 13:34 *"A new commandment I give you: love one another as I have loved you"*

If we turn to the epistles, in Romans 15 we read: *"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbour for his good to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself, but, as it is written 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.'"*

Or listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 5:2 *"be imitators of God ... and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."*

Again, in Philippians 2: 5-11 he says: *"Your attitude should be same as that of Christ Jesus ... who ... did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing .. and became obedient to death – even death on a cross."*

And, in 1 Peter 2 verse 21, which we read earlier on: *“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps. ... He himself bore our sin in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.”*

I hope you have noticed what these passages do not say. We don't read, “You remember how Jesus treated that woman who was caught in adultery – well you should aim to be like that” or, “Look at the compassion Jesus showed to the crowd, healing and teaching them – you do the same.” Don't get me wrong, it is important for Christians to be loving, forgiving and compassionate, - but all the passages I quoted, and many others, focus on one particular event in Jesus' life – not his “good works” or his healing or helping, no, all of them focus on his ultimate “good work” his death on the cross.

God wants us to be like Christ and yet these passages all point us to his death! What does that mean? What is it about Jesus in his death that we are to imitate? Yes, the passages mention humility, enduring unjust suffering, loving one another, not pleasing ourselves – all of these clearly are Christ-like qualities of genuine goodness that we would do well to imitate, but there is something more about Jesus that we're called to imitate. Let me remind you again what Paul says in Philippians 2: *“Your attitude should be same as that of Christ Jesus ... who ... did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing ... and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.”*

Paul says that Jesus humbled himself because he put our salvation before his own life. Paul's exhortation to imitate Christ's humility comes in the context of urging us to, *“... live a life worthy of the gospel ... contending as one for the faith of the gospel.”* (Phil 1:27).

That is God's plan for us - we are to struggle together in defending the gospel and labour humbly for its growth, because we are determined to bring to salvation those around us, just as Jesus was. In 1 Peter 2: 18-21, slaves are told to endure unjust suffering not just because it is a good thing to do! Peter says that they and everyone (that includes you and me) should, *“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.”* (1 Pet 2:12).

It is better for a slave to take an unjust punishment than to hit back, because by suffering abuse in a good-natured way, he may break down some of the barriers to his master becoming a Christian. In other words, the master's salvation and God's glory are more important than getting justice or the personal dignity of a Christian slave. Christians have suffered like everyone else with the effects of the Coronavirus and Covid-19 throughout 2020 and will do so into 2021. But it is how believers react to their suffering that can be a powerful witness to others who have no foundation of faith.

When Paul urges the strong to bear with the failings of the weak and everyone to welcome each other in Romans 15, he doesn't mean just putting up with each other. He means positively and actively trying to build each other up instead of pleasing ourselves (which is, of course, much easier and something that we are much more practiced!). Jesus didn't bear the insults of those who hated him just because he was a nice guy! He did it to achieve God's overarching purpose - that Jews and Gentiles should praise God together. Similarly, we must put aside pleasing ourselves and work together to build each other up in the faith. It also means that we should welcome everyone into our fellowship including those who may be different to us and even those we dislike! And we do this so that together we can praise God for saving us. Imitating

Christ, being transformed to his likeness, means having the same goals, not merely the same character as Christ.

So as Christ invites us to meet today around his table and remember what he has done for us, he calls us to be more like him. And as we obey his command on this first Sunday of a new year, surely we need to make a resolution that we must keep - to be like Jesus. And that will mean having the same passion and ambition that Jesus had – that sinners would be saved and so bring praise to God. If we have that passion – and surely if we are to be the church God wants us to be, we **MUST** have that passion - it will drive us to be humble, it will drive us to serve others with real love; it will drive us to putting up with criticism, and maybe even persecution and injustice and lots of other things beside.

The challenge for us all as we take part in our Lord's Supper at the beginning of a new year – a year that will undoubtedly be a challenging one for us individually and as a church, is to ask ourselves, "Are we allowing God to work his changes in us?" Are we are being transformed to be like Jesus?

You may have made a resolution to change your eating habits or your exercise routine. You may desire to reform your ways in some other way; but the best thing to do is to allow God to transform you, and the place to begin that process is at the foot of the Cross, laying your life down before Christ even as we remember how he has laid down his life for us. Amen.