

Living The Good Life.

Text: 1 Pet 2:11-20

Suggested Hymns:

107, 103, 180, 341, 347

1) How a Christian lives the good life

2) Why a Christian strives to live the good life

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is based on the Epistle for today, 1 Peter 2:11-20, *¹¹ Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, ¹² having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.*

¹³ Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men -- ¹⁶ as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. ¹⁷ Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.

¹⁸ Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. ¹⁹ For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. ²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Down through the ages philosophers and religious teachers have held forth the ideal of "the good life." Their understanding of the good life, and their approach to it, has taken various forms; and yet, through it all, there has been a certain common denominator.

People have agreed that there are certain basic virtues, qualities of mind and action, that stamp a person as “good.” This very fact is proof enough that the original knowledge of God’s Law has not been completely erased from the heart of man.

The Christian understanding of the “good life,” however, is different from that of the moral philosopher, or of any ethical or religious teacher who is not a Christian. This is the case, even though the product of these systems may, to all outward appearances, seem to be about the same.

Many people of our own acquaintance, not associated with the Church, have attained to such a degree of civic righteousness and adhere to such a high code of morality and ethics that there seems to be little to distinguish them from the Christian so far as their outward conduct is concerned.

And yet there is a difference. The difference may not always be visible, but it is to be found within. It is a difference of motivation. However good and generous and moral the unbeliever may be, his way of life bears the taint of pride and self-interest.

The Christian, however, is constrained and motivated by the love of Christ. He lives the good life, not because he seeks to achieve special merit by it, or for any selfish concern, but because he has felt the transforming power of the Spirit of God within him.

It follows, then, that the good works of the unbeliever carry no spiritual merit, but that the same works when performed by the Christian are pleasing to God, not because of their outward character, but because of their inner motivation. The presence of Christ in the heart makes all the difference.

St. Peter, in the rather lengthy series of ethical admonitions which he addresses to his readers, and to us, in our today’s text, discusses the good life from the Christian standpoint. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. How A Christian Lives The Good Life

The Apostle, of course, cannot begin to cover every situation that the Christian confronts in his daily walk of life, every decision that he must make. He does, however, lay down certain general principles which should guide the Christian in these circumstances.

He shows, in the first place, that the Christian must at all times be moral, not only in a general sort of way, but by applying the test of Christian morality to specific cases. He begins by telling us to “*abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.*”

The attitude of our modern age is simply to take a light and liberal view of what the Apostle calls “fleshly lusts,” and even to glorify such things. These things include, the cheapening of the sacred ordinance of marriage and the frightening increase in the divorce rate; the flood of indecent printed material that infests the newsagents and bookstores and corrupts the tastes and undermines the morals of the youth; the glamorous way in which wickedness, immorality, and loose living are portrayed on the TV; the increase in the consumption of alcohol and the gambling craze which has taken hold of so many people. All these are examples of, and stimulate into action the “*fleshly lusts*,” from which the Apostle earnestly warns us to avoid.

The reason to avoid them is very clear: They “*war against the soul.*” We must all be very conscious of the continuing warfare that is being waged within us. The contenders are God and the devil, and the prize is our immortal soul.

There can be no truce in that spiritual battle, for light and darkness can never come to any agreement. To compromise means to surrender. The downward pull of our sinful nature is in itself so strong that it involves life-long resistance on our part.

But the danger will be all the greater if we let down our guard in facing the malicious forces from without that seek our spiritual undoing, “*the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.*”¹ And thus, when the pleasures and habits of the world seek to allure us, the only means to insure our spiritual safety and moral integrity is to “*abstain*” from them.

The second requirement of the good life is honesty. *Having your conduct honorable [honest] among the Gentiles.*” Honesty is the best policy. In fact it is the only policy acceptable to the Christian. In our personal relationships and in our business dealings there is no room for the deceitful word, the “shady deal,” or the broken promise. We have no better example than that of Jesus Himself, of whom it could be said, “*Nor was deceit found in His mouth.*”²

The good life, moreover, must be marked by obedience. “*Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme,¹⁴ or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good.*”

It is a rule of both the divine Law and the natural Law that obedience brings its own reward. To the Israelites it brought the promise of the good land which they were to inherit and the enjoyment of its abundant fruits.

To people and nations everywhere the respect for law and the obedience to rightful authority has spelled peace and prosperity. The opposite of obedience is anarchy, and anarchy has always left in its wake the devil’s brood of disaster, suffering, and death. This is because anarchy strikes at the very foundation of the divine order, the authority of God Himself, which He in turn has delegated to human agents.

And thus our obedience to the government is in reality obedience to God Himself. It does not matter, therefore, whether we may or may not agree with the wisdom or necessity of a given law. As long as it stands, it is to be obeyed.

Nor does it matter whether we think a rule or statute is too trivial to bother about. We are to obey the traffic signals and keep within the speed limits. The test of Christian character is not so much resistance to spectacular temptations and the winning of great moral victories as rather the conscientious performance of the small, routine, unobserved tasks and duties of our everyday life. This is the case even though it would be simpler to “cut corners” or to “take the easy way out.” St. Peter makes no exceptions to this rule, great or small. “*Submit yourselves*” he says, “*to every ordinance.*”

A further mark of the good life is a sense of responsibility. Our text explains it like this, “*As free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God.*” We are free both politically, as citizens of our country, and spiritually, as subjects of the kingdom of God.

How are we using our liberty? It is easy, now that we have been freed from the bondage of the Law, to become careless or selfish in the exercise of our freedom and to turn our liberty into simply doing whatever we please.

What we too often forget is that while we enjoy the blessings of Christian liberty, we are now held by the cords of a higher and nobler bondage, the law of Christian love. That is why Luther said of the Christian man that he is “*lord of all and subject to none*” and, at the same time, “*servant of all and subject to all men.*”

Using our liberty in the service of God and our fellow men, we shall “***Honor all people,***” treat them with the consideration that we expect ourselves and show due respect for their rights and their possessions.

And in special measure we shall “***love the brotherhood,***” that is, show concern for the well-being, both spiritual and temporal, of our fellow Christians. For while we are to do good to all people, the Scripture itself tells us in particular to take care of those who are “***of the household of faith.***”

It is a law of nature and of God that our first responsibility is toward our own. Our fellow believers, in a very real sense, are “our own,” because we are members of the same spiritual family. We are children of the same Father, and heirs together of the same eternal heritage.

The good life, furthermore, will be evidenced by faithfulness. Our text goes on, “***Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh.***” Most of us, in one respect or another, are “servants,” for we are accountable to some employer or overseer in the performance of our daily work.

It is easy and pleasant to work for someone who is kind and considerate. It is quite another matter to have a “boss” who is harsh, mean, and unreasonable. A relationship like that puts our Christian faith to a real test. And yet the Scriptural rule is clear, “***it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.***”³

And, in that connection, St. Peter lists a final characteristic of the good life, patience. He writes, “***For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God.***”

That makes good sense, doesn't it? There is no particular virtue in the kind of patience that suffers in silence under well-deserved punishment. But the spirit that will endure injustice and persecution with Christian fortitude, and without

thought of revenge, exhibits the kind of patience that the Lord numbers among the great Christian virtues.

How patient are we when things go wrong, when people treat us spitefully, when our plans meet a delay in fulfilment, or when our faith is ridiculed and our ideals are scoffed at? The hot reply readily comes to our lips; we are tempted to pound our fist against the wall; our blood is quick to rush in anger. It is hard, at times, to be patient.

Hard, indeed, but necessary. Necessary, that is, if we really want to live the good life. And to live the good life means that our reactions will be different from those of a person who is not in tune with God and who has set his standards lower.

To live the good life means that we shall not lamely excuse our show of weakness, our outbursts of sin, by saying, "*Well, that's the way I am!*" To live the good life means to make a conscious effort, with the help of God, to be different and to rise above those very frailties and failings that come most naturally to us. To know how to live the good life is the mark of our Christian faith.

2. Why A Christian Strives To Live The Good Life

But we shall know how to live the good life only if we know why we should live the good life. St. Peter also gives us ample instruction on this matter, as he stresses the proper motivation for living aright.

He begins by reminding us that we are but "*strangers and pilgrims*" here on earth. This is not our real and abiding home. Then why act as if it was?

By catering to our flesh, by exalting the importance of material things, we make this life, and this world, the object of our real concern. That is why so many people experience unhappiness and despair. They focus all their efforts and all their devotion on earthly things like, loved ones, honours, money, and fun. And then, suddenly, the earthly treasures that they clutch crumble to dust in their very grasp.

The Christian has a different outlook on life. He views this world, not as an end in itself, but as the 'entry room' of heaven. He passes through it, enjoying the good gifts that God gives him here, thankful for God's bounty; but he

remembers all the while that he is only “*passing through.*” For, after all, he is but a “*stranger and pilgrim*” on earth. And so he lives the good life here only as a preparation for the perfect life hereafter.

The Christian is motivated to live the good life, moreover, because he knows that his good example will serve a twofold purpose. Thus the Christian will “*put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.*” And the Christian’s good works will make such an impression upon those who observe them that they will be led to “*glorify God in the day of visitation.*”

There is no better answer to insults, ridicule and malice than to show a spirit of meekness, goodness, and forgiveness. Any bully knows that there is no thrill in baiting a person who does not fight back. The best way to stop hatred is to repay it with love.

We read in Proverbs 15:1 that “*A soft answer turns away wrath.*” That is the Christian way. Strangely enough, it works. How often do we try it?

When they meet such a Christian attitude, foolish men will not only be put to silence, but they will even be led to glorify God. Christianity has always had that kind of effect upon its foes, ever since the days of the Roman empire, when the heathen had to say of the Christians, “*Behold, how they love one another!*” The Christian’s witness means not only preaching from the housetops but also living the good life.

The Christian will live the good life, furthermore, because his conscience will not let him do anything less, assuming that his conscience has been properly sharpened by the Law and properly mellowed by the Gospel.

Our text calls it *commendable* or “thank-worthy” if a man “*because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully.*” The conscientious person is inevitably the one who suffers most. His sensitivity to right and wrong will never let him be lulled into moral indifference. And the conscience that is informed by the Spirit of God will be a powerful dynamic for living the good life.

And the Apostle sums it all up by saying that we must live the good life “*for the Lord’s sake.*” The Lord is both the Source and Object of everything that is

good and pure and true in our lives. Our journey on this earth is to serve no other purpose than His glory.

But even the best works that we do cannot begin to repay God for what He has done for us. For He has literally done everything for us. He has given us the priceless gift of salvation, which is ours through faith in the atoning merits of His Son, Jesus Christ, whom God has sent to be our Redeemer.

Scripture tells us in Romans 5:20 that *where sin abounded, grace abounded much more*. The grace of God is personified in Jesus Christ whose blood has made us clean and whose sacrifice has reconciled us with God.

Let us conclude with the words of the hymnist,⁴

*Do no sinful action,
Speak no angry word:
Ye belong to Jesus,
Children of the Lord. Amen*

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ 1 John 2:16

² 1 Peter 2:22

³ 1 Corinthians 4:2

⁴ Hymn 610