

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost; July 9, 2023
“We Follow Christ in Our Works – and Our Words”
1 Peter 3:8-15

Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another. Show sympathy, brotherly love, compassion, and humility. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. Instead, speak a blessing, because you were called for the purpose of inheriting a blessing. Indeed:

**Let the one who wants to love life
and to see good days
keep his tongue from evil
and his lips from saying anything deceitful.
Let him turn from evil and do what is good.
Let him speak peace and pursue it.
For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their requests.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.**

Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you should happen to suffer because of righteousness, you are blessed. Do not be afraid of what they fear, and do not be troubled. But regard the Lord, the Christ, as holy in your hearts. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is in you.

Jesus walks along the shores of the sea. He stops and calls fisherman to follow him, and promises them that when they do, he will make them catchers not of fish, but of people. He calls them to leave their life as they know it and let him change everything about what they will do. Jesus does this clearly, intentionally, and urgently. He does not hem and haw. He puts his call into the language his chosen will understand. And he leaves them no time to ponder his call. Just come, follow me.

They are now called to watch where Jesus sets his feet, and whenever he lifts his toes, they must set their heel in the print. They will follow him in everything he does. They will also speak as Jesus speaks. Jesus will spend the next three years traveling through Israel proclaiming the good news of salvation and the promise of heaven. His disciples’ words will follow his, just as their works will follow his. They will catch people the same way Jesus does: by proclaiming the good news of salvation in him.

They will do it at Jesus’ side. They will do it on Pentecost just after Jesus ascends. They will speak the gospel throughout Israel and into Gentile lands. Some of them will write the gospel in the Scripture, under the Spirit’s inspiration. Jesus calls them to follow him in their works and their words; and they will, until they join Jesus in heaven, most of them martyred.

It would be misleading to tell you that Jesus has called you to do exactly the same things as he called those first disciples to do. You were not called to walk through Israel with him and learn from him in person. Nor were you called to speak in tongues on Pentecost. And you were not called to be an apostle who preaches and teaches the gospel publicly. To draw a direct line from the call of the first disciples to your own is inaccurate.

But Jesus has most definitely called you, too. St. Peter, one of those fishers Jesus called on the shore to follow him, was one of the apostles whom the Spirit used to write the Word of God. When Peter did that,

he was not writing to other apostles. He was writing to what I like to call “normal Christians,” Christians who did not have a call to preach or teach God’s Word publicly – but they were still called.

To those normal, everyday Christians Peter wrote: **you were called for the purpose of inheriting a blessing.** When the Holy Spirit brought you to faith in Jesus, he called you to inherit the blessing of heaven. Jesus came and walked on this earth not only to call disciples, but to save them. He earned the blessing of heaven for us by walking every step and speaking every word in perfect conformity with his Father’s will. Everything he did he did because the Father wanted him to. Everything he said he said because the Father wanted him to. He did it to save people who have not done and said the Father’s works and words, who still do not perfectly. Because Jesus came with holy works and words, we have forgiveness for all our sins, all the times we have done and said things that violate our Father’s will.

When the Spirit called you to faith in Jesus, he called you to inherit the blessing of heaven that Jesus came to win for you. He washed away all your sins in the blood Jesus shed on the cross and exchanged your sin for Jesus’ holy life. In Jesus, you are called to be God’s child with the promised inheritance of heaven.

That’s what the Spirit called you to, when he called you to faith in Jesus: an inheritance that lasts forever, through the work of Jesus Christ. Many Christians received that call to faith in baptism, where the Spirit brings sinners to faith, and for Jesus’ sake washes away their sins and clothes them in Jesus righteousness.

At a pastor’s meeting, the subject for some reason came up about babies crying when the water of baptism hits them. Some practical advice was offered first: make sure the baby is awake when the water hits, because the child is less likely to be startled; make sure the water is room temperature, because if it’s cold it will shock the child. Finally, an old codger pastor who rarely spoke said: “Let the child cry. You’d cry too if Satan was getting his backside kicked out of your soul.” When I baptize babies, I do try to make sure they’re awake and the water is warm. But it no longer bothers me if they cry. Because what the man said is true: in baptism you become God’s child, wrestled out of Satan’s grip, and out of the control of eternal death.

When you come to faith, whether in baptism or later through the preaching of the gospel, you are called to be God’s child. That means the inheritance of heaven is yours. But you are also called to live like a child of God. And now it is right to compare your call to the first disciples’. When Jesus called them to faith, he called them to walk in his footsteps, and to speak what he speaks.

Peter – again, writing to “normal” Christians like you – makes this clear. He does not insist that they preach on Sunday mornings or travel the world as missionaries. But watch what he demands of their works: **Finally, all of you live in harmony with one another. Show sympathy, brotherly love, compassion, and humility...But even if you should suffer because of righteousness, you are blessed. Do not be afraid of what they fear, and do not be troubled.**

Why does St. Peter call all Christians to do these works? Who worked for harmony among his bickering disciples? Who showed sympathy to the outcasts and marginalized of his world, like women and child and the physically challenged? Who showed brotherly love by dropping to his knees and washing feet? Who showed compassion by saving a sinful woman and commanding her to go and sin no more? Who showed humility by giving up heaven’s glory and coming to save us? Who suffered for his righteousness, and considered it a blessing because it was for our salvation, and his Father’s glory? Who died in peace, knowing that his Father would raise him three days later?

These are the steps of Jesus Christ. We are called to walk in them. Before we take our first step, we remember that we do it as God's forgiven children. We have not always followed in Christ's steps. We are guilty of sin. But we are forgiven through faith in God's Son, and now called to walk right behind him.

We live in harmony with one another, like our Savior. Jesus' people say, "I am called to follow Christ. So, I may be fully convinced I'm right and you're wrong. But for the sake of harmony, you will have your way unless I believe your course will hurt you or others. "

We live with sympathy and compassion. Jesus' people say, "If you hurt, I hurt too. And because I feel what you feel, I will seek your relief just as fervently as if I were the one in pain. I look for those forgotten by others and help them with my works."

We live in brotherly love. Jesus' people say, "My purpose is to prove my love with my works, and not only to say kind things. My Jesus laid down his life for me; there is nothing I will not give to my brothers and sisters in faith."

We live in humility. Jesus' people say, "My Savior thought of himself last when he answered his Father's call to enter the womb of a young lady he created, into a world that he created perfect and watched fall into sin, when he came in a stable and walked dusty streets and allowed himself to be nailed to a cross to pay for my sins. Like my Savior, I will think of myself less and others more."

We suffer for righteousness, without fear. Jesus' people say, "I am living in a world that becomes more hostile to my faith every day, a world that will call me hateful for holding to basic and clear teachings of God's Word. I do not care what they call me. I do not care what they do to me. Even if it means my life, it will only be the start of life eternal. My Jesus died without fear and conquered death. And now he lives forever. So I too will die without fear, conquering death in him."

This is the call of every Christian, whether an apostle or a pastor or a wife or a mail carrier or a citizen or a gardener or any combination of the above: do what Jesus does.

But all those called to follow Jesus are commanded not only to do what he does, but to speak what he speaks. This applies to the things we say to each other, our fellow believers: **Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. Instead, speak a blessing.** Have you ever returned an insult with a blessing? That's not how people are expected to respond to insults. We are expected to reply in kind, and preferably with an insult that's even more clever and biting than the one received. How it stands out when Christians bless those insult them! I once heard one Christian classmate say to another who had just gotten her hair done, "You look like Chewbacca right after he wakes up." And the response was, "Well, I like your hair." Not quite a blessing, exactly. But it certainly did reflect the heart of Christ. This is how Jesus' people repay evil and insults: with kindness and blessing.

This is also following our Savior. So many spoke evil to him. So many insulted him. He did speak harshly to them sometimes, because he loved them and wanted to wake them up. But he also repaid their insults with blessing. He blessed them, too, with forgiveness for their sins. He lived for them, too. He died for them, too. He called out from the cross for the blessing of forgiveness for them, too.

We also follow our Savior when confessing him to those who do not believe: **Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is in you.** On the Tonight Show, Jay Leno used to do a segment called Jaywalking. He sent someone out to Hollywood Boulevard with a

film crew to walk up to strangers and ask them very easy questions about history, science, and other things. And then he cut together the most ridiculous answers into a five-minute segment, where every day Americans explained that Christopher Columbus discovered America 1776, or that the first president was Neil Armstrong.

It was funny. But to be fair, it made me wonder, “What sort of nonsense would come out of my mouth if someone walked up to me with a microphone and asked me a question I was not prepared for? Would I also say that the sun is a planet, or that Winston Churchill is a brand of cigarettes? I might. It’s hard to answer when you’re not prepared.”

Peter says that following Christ is being ready to give the reason for your hope. Jesus was always ready. He spoke the truth about himself and his heavenly Father completely, accurately, and without flinching. Following him is to speak the same way.

We need to be ready. What would you say if a stranger asked you for the reason for your hope? I have always encouraged Christians to use the Apostles’ Creed. You know it by heart, whether you realize it or not. You probably wouldn’t want to recite it word for word, but you can follow it as an outline: “I have the hope of heaven because God the Father made me. He sent his Son who came as God and man. He suffered and died for me and rose from the dead. He ascended and still rules. I believe the Holy Spirit gives me and all Christians the faith to believe this, and that when Jesus comes back, we will rise and live with him forever.” See, I just paraphrased the Apostles’ Creed. You can do it, too. Just practice it a little, and you’ll be ready.

Or you can do it even more simply than that. If you want to, you can follow the single sentence Peter writes just before this command to be ready with your reason: **But regard the Lord, the Christ, as holy in your hearts.** Jesus is my Lord. He is God. And he is the Christ, whom his Father chose to save the world. Jesus is holy. He lived a holy life to make up for everyone’s sins. He died a death as the holy sacrifice to take everyone’s sins away. I know this in my heart, because the Spirit has taught it to me.

It doesn’t have to be a dogmatics textbook. But we should be ready. This is the call Jesus gave to his first disciples on the shore: catch people for Jesus by telling them about Jesus. It is his call for us, too.

In pure grace, you were called to trust in Christ and receive his holy life as your own, his sacrifice to wash away your sins. You are called to inherit the blessing of heaven. You are also called to follow Christ in works and words. Until you reach your eternal blessing, follow him in all you do and say. Amen.