

VALLEY WORSHIP TALK / 10th MAY 2026

1 Peter 3: 8-12

⁸ Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. ⁹ Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. ¹⁰ For,

*“Whoever would love life
and see good days
must keep their tongue from evil
and their lips from deceitful speech.
¹¹ They must turn from evil and do good;
they must seek peace and pursue it.
¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous
and his ears are attentive to their prayer,
but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”*

We've recently been on a tour of the Balkans with very good friends, visiting Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania and Corfu. The tour's focus was on cultural treasures, many ancient, but along the way we learned a lot about the tortured history of the region and the endless conflicts between neighbouring peoples. Sometimes these conflicts were motivated by religious differences or competition for territory, but more often than not they seem to have arisen as vengeance for previous disputes, even ones hundreds of years previously.

To the outsider these peoples seem to have so much in common – often shared genetic roots, almost identical ways of life, deep trading relationships in good times and even similar appearances – yet they have still turned on each other murderously time and again.

These repeated cycles of recrimination and violence were so depressing to learn about. They led me to ponder why they never stopped, right up to many of our own life-times – as you know, the Balkans erupted in conflict in the early 1990s, almost as soon as oppressive Communist control ended. What would it take for lasting peace to prevail there?

This brief passage is packed with wisdom, all expressed with the realism that is typical of the Apostle Peter's writing. And, near the start, in verse 9, he tells us clearly how cycles of conflict can be broken and peace can be made – ‘Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing.’

This short command sounds so simple. Yet it is so counter-cultural and actually runs contrary to our own natures.

Please think back to a time, maybe distant or recent, when you have been wronged, insulted or hurt in some way – maybe a nasty verbal barb shot at you, a false accusation arising from a misunderstanding, a red-faced driver in the opposite lane shaking his fist at you for some unknown reason, or maybe even just being nagged one too many times by your spouse.

Recently a trusted friend told me something someone else had said about me that was really hurtful – what made it all the more galling was that the hurtful comment was based on

completely false information about the role I'd played in a difficult situation. My instant reaction was real, self-protective anger at being seen in this light, with no basis in fact, particularly when I had tried to be a peacemaker in this difficult situation.

So, when you thought back just now to a time when you'd be wronged or insulted, was your first instinct really to bless the perpetrator?

Honestly, based on my reaction when I heard what had been said about me not long ago, that seems unlikely. We are probably more like Serbs, Croats or Bosnians, even here in the placid Itchen Valley, than we might like to admit. Anyone who receives the Itchen List e-mails will have witnessed the animosity, and even hatred, that sometimes surfaces there, just as it does on so many forms of social media where there are no controls on content.

There seems to something deep within us that makes us want to retaliate, to find fault with others and to justify ourselves. When wounded, our first reaction is usually to want to return the blow, to settle scores or to raise the stakes in insulting whoever has insulted us even more strongly to put them in their place.

Yet Peter's advice not to repay evil with evil is crystal clear. What makes it credible?

As you know, Peter lived alongside Jesus throughout his three years of public ministry and, as one of the disciples closest to him, was able to watch Jesus in action every step of the way. He would have heard Jesus say remarkable things like these:

- 'But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.' (Matthew 5:39); or
- 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' (Matthew 5:44); or
- When Peter asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.' (Matthew 18:21-22) – in Scripture the number seven often signals completion, so Jesus was effectively saying just keep forgiving and forgiving, without limit.

Now Peter didn't just hear Jesus offering this advice - he was an eye-witness to how Jesus applied his loving, peace-making teaching to real life situations, even the most challenging and stressful ones.

Let's remember that Peter was with Jesus as he endured deep opposition from the Roman and Jewish authorities, as he was unlawfully arrested and as he faced false accusations in a show trial. Peter sat with the guards to hear the trial's outcome – a wholly unjustified condemnation of Jesus and a gruesome, unwarranted sentence of crucifixion; even the Roman Governor Pilate could find no basis for it. And, although Peter ran from the pressure and deserted Jesus at that point, he would have heard from others how Jesus cried out for his oppressors to be forgiven as he died on the cross.

So Peter had direct exposure to the ultimate example of a wholly innocent man repaying evil not with evil, but rather with blessing. Probably even more powerfully for him, even though Peter had abandoned Jesus when he most needed his support, Jesus did not reject nor rebuke Peter when they were reunited on the shores of Lake Galilee after Jesus' resurrection. Instead, as recounted so movingly in John Chapter 21, Jesus treated Peter with gentleness,

love and dignity, helping him -- with no recriminations made nor paybacks demanded -- to overcome his shame at what he'd done and to heal him of it.

So I think it is worth listening to Peter when he calls on us to overcome our natures and not to return evil for evil.

Returning to today's passage, verse 12 says 'For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous.' What does 'righteous' mean? Simply that we are acceptable to God. Yet how is that possible? If we search our hearts and are honest with ourselves and with God, none of us have really lived the right sort of lives consistently – always sympathetic, loving, compassionate and humble, as verse 8 calls us to be. More painfully, we almost certainly have to admit that we have at times used our tongues for evil, indulging in gossip or maybe even slander and deceitful speech, which verse 10 clearly warns against.

In reality, no one can be good enough to dare to come into the presence of holy God, whose face 'is against those who do evil,' as verse 12 concludes.

We need someone to cleanse us of all the ways we have disappointed God – our sins, in other words – and to restore a right relationship with God for us, because we are unable to do this ourselves. We need a mediator between us and God, just as Iran and US need Pakistan in the middle right now, as sadly without its support they can communicate with each other only by launching drones and missiles back and forth.

That mediator between a holy God and all of us who have let him down is Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross, he took on to himself all the sins of humanity – past, present and future – and received God's judgment of these failings, paying the price for them in full with his own life. As a result, when we recognise what Jesus has done for us and accept him as our saviour, we are free of paying this price ourselves. While we deserve to have God turn his face away from us and to be sent out of his presence, instead – astonishingly - we are welcomed into his presence, made clean by all that Jesus accomplished.

But when we receive this free gift of grace, we can't just hold on to it, satisfied that our own debt has been paid but not showing similar grace to others, still holding those who've hurt us to account, resenting them and holding grudges.

In 2005, a business in which I'd been a partner for most of the previous decade was sold to an acquirer that I didn't respect and whose values I found challenging. It gave us various financial incentives to stay on for three years after the sale. However, after 18 months I found life there so difficult that I decided to leave, having been offered an attractive new job by one of our clients. Because of the potential conflict, I took careful legal advice on my contract and knew that I was within my rights to leave, but when I arranged a meeting to tell our Managing Partner of my decision he became incensed -- I think because he probably wanted to leave himself and was frustrated that I had found a way out and he had not.

Despite the fact that we'd worked closely and constructively together for years, he threatened me with all kinds of false accusations that he said he would bring to our new owner's attention if I didn't change my mind. These culminated in a ludicrous, completely groundless threat to sue me, at which point I lost it and tapped in to retaliatory instincts, giving him both barrels and threatening to sue him right back – of course in reality an equally ludicrous, completely groundless threat on my part.

I had a couple of broken nights of sleep after this terrible exchange. I was so hurt by the false accusations that my mind turned to how I could get even and what I'd say to our employer about him that was negative if I got the chance. At the same time I had to wrestle with the aggression in my response to him that was really out of character and to ask myself why I had yielded without any hesitation to the temptation to return fire.

In the end what steadied me was bringing all the hurt to God and consciously forgiving my colleague for the wrongs done to me. As I was contending with his false accusations, I was drawn to the simple verse at the top of our service sheet today – 'Forgive as the Lord forgave you' – from Colossians Chapter 3, verse 13. I realised that if I wrote of a list of the ways my colleague had hurt me, it would have been much, much shorter than the list of things I'd done that would have offended God over the years (including how I had reacted in the moment to my colleague's barrage).

I realised afresh that I had received so much forgiveness and grace from God over time. From that place of both security and self-awareness, I was able to have a measured further conversation with my colleague, to show him that the legal advice I'd received could withstand scrutiny and to resist further temptation to return insult for insult. In the end he didn't repeat his threats and accepted my decision. When I left six months later we parted on good terms.

This very verse – 'Forgive as the Lord forgave you' – came back to my mind when I was wrestling with how to react to the hurtful words directed my way -- but behind my back -- recently. There was a big part of me that wanted to retaliate in some way and to keep resenting the people involved. However, ultimately I recognised this was not Jesus' way of living life as someone for whom he gave his own life. I had to make a decision to let this go, to hold my own tongue and to forgive them – and to keep forgiving every time this came to mind and when I sensed my anger surfacing again.

I'm well aware that these two situations I've described involved just words and not the many other ways that human beings can do damage to each other more violently. In making the case for not returning evil for evil, I'm not suggesting that there aren't times for us to be firm in our response to wrongs done to us – say by putting clear boundaries in place to prevent further harm mentally and physically.

But what I am saying is there is nothing to be gained by endless escalations and cycles of punch and counter-punch. Ultimately the only way to avoid those fruitless outcomes is – with the help of God's spirit within us -- to release those who have hurt us to God's perfect judgment (not seeking to impose it ourselves), to leave our resentments at the cross and to forgive and forgive again, seventy times seven, as Jesus told Peter to do.

Let's close on a note of encouragement. What does a relationship, or a family, or a community where evil isn't repaid with evil look like and where its members are at peace with each other? A beautiful picture is painted here in just a few verses – it is a place where people are sympathetic, love one another and are compassionate and humble, verse 8. It is one where blessings are inherited, verse 9 – painful cycles (sometimes lasting for generations) are broken and good things are passed on. Its people love life and see good days, verse 10, keeping their lips from deceitful speech. They do good and seek peace, verse 11. Finally, they are righteous before God, allowing him to be attentive to their prayers and

to turn his face to them, verse 12. Where can we repay evil with blessing in our lives to make this picture become a reality?

Amen.