

## Treat Other Christians Right

Some people say Christians are no different from anyone else. They claim that Christians lie, steal, cheat, fight and hate as bad as or even worse than those who are not Christians. They cite specific examples of misbehavior by Christians and rehearse historic events of atrocities committed in the name of Jesus Christ.

I must tell you that has not been my experience at all. Over a lifetime in the church and among Christians I have repeatedly been impressed by the good behavior of followers of Jesus Christ. It's not that I haven't seen bad examples; I have. But the number of good examples has been extraordinary and some of the best behavior has been in the worst of circumstances. Under stress, pressure, threat, persecution, sickness, false accusations and death I have been stunned by the grace, goodness and love I have witnessed from Christians.

My experience was also the expectation and experience of St. Peter in 1 Peter 3:8-12. He wrote to Christians who were facing difficulty on every side. Life was hard in the first century. Cities were overcrowded. Sewage ran in the streets. As a result disease was rampant and life expectancy was short. Epidemics were feared and frequent, sometimes wiping out large portions of the population. Immorality was common. Corruption was pervasive. People were treated poorly. But in the worst of times and places Peter encouraged Christians to treat others right.

When others behave badly is when Christians must behave well. When darkness reigns and hope has all but disappeared is when Christians have the greatest opportunity to shine brightly. That's why Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:8-9:

*Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.*

First on Peter's list for treating others right is to "live in harmony with one another."

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Awhile ago I received the first of several telephone calls from the office of a best-selling author and Harvard professor. His writing has focused on the disintegration of community in America. There is growing loneliness which he illustrates with the example that a generation or more ago people bowled in leagues while now people tend to bowl alone. But he is now doing research to find positive examples of community in American society.

Where does genuine community exist? Where do people get along? Where is there harmony and mutual support in spite of differences? At the top of his list is the church. The obvious place for this Harvard researcher to begin is the church. He called me to ask which churches in America are the best to research to see harmonious community first-hand. I could almost hear Peter up in the observation tower of heaven applauding and saying, "That's exactly what I had in mind! When the whole world wants to look for the best example of people in harmony they look to Christians as the number one example!"

Harmony doesn't mean that we all agree on everything. It doesn't mean that we're all the same. Harmony does mean that we get along. Literally the word means "to have the same mind" about something. As Christians we share the mind of Jesus Christ; we think like Jesus. We join together in thinking what Jesus thinks. It's almost as if we all are wearing bracelets that say, "WWJT—What Would Jesus Think?" Harmony is unity without uniformity.

Christians are members of the family of Jesus called the church. Families compromise and work hard to support one another. It doesn't just happen. It sometimes takes sacrifice. It requires putting the good of the group ahead of the desires of the individual.

Let me tell you what my picture of ideal harmony is: It's when you agree with me! But that's not what the Bible is talking about here. The call is for each of us to do whatever we can to get along with others. That means each of us does whatever

we need to do to bring peace into our relationships with others. We see harmony as a personal responsibility. It is my job, not someone else's.

Second on Peter's list for treating others right is sympathy. This word comes for the Greek word "pathos" which means "feelings" or "emotions". The prefix means "with". So, sympathy means to "feel with someone else".

Sometimes there isn't much we can do to change a difficult situation. She lost her job. He was in a car accident. Health insurance won't pay. The diagnosis is terminal. The marriage is over. The lawsuit is lost. The verdict is "guilty". The break-up is permanent. We may not have money to lend, the answer to the question or any reasonable solution to the problem but we can feel with others. We can cry with them. We can listen to their hurts and horrors. We can tell them we're sorry.

Sympathy is one of the most marvelous gifts anyone can give. It's not that we can fully understand. It's not that we actually feel the same elation or pain. It's not that we agree with everything they've done. But we are joined together at the heart. We imagine what it would be like to be in the other person's situation. We feel sympathy for the person with AIDS. Our hearts go out to the person in prison whether he or she is guilty or innocent. We sense the pain of the broken heart. We're saddened by the widow's loneliness. We're angry over crimes and injustices against the poor. We weep with those who are abused.

As Christians we should never be insensitive to the plight of others. Always feel more sympathy than blame. Always remember that could be you suffering. Be sympathetic!

Third on Peter's list for treating others right is to "love as brothers." Maybe Peter should have added an age here. Some young brothers can be downright mean to each other. Some people come from families where the worst example of love is the relationship between brothers.

On second thought, maybe Peter knew what he was talking about. He had a brother named Andrew. They grew up together in the northern part of Israel. As adults they bought a boat and began a fishing business together on Lake Galilee. Andrew was instrumental in Peter becoming a follower of Jesus. Between his own experience and observation of others he knew there is a bond between

brothers unlike any other. When parents die young brothers have to watch out for each other. When life's problems press in, brothers can always talk to each other. When everyone else abandons you your brother will take your calls. There is a relationship of guaranteed mutual support that is common between brothers in all places and at all times.

As Christians we are to love one another as if we are related to one another. We may not always agree or even like each other but we are still brothers and sisters who are there for each other. When all others abandon us Christians need to stick together.

Anyone who reads the Bible, attends church regularly or has been a Christian for a long time has heard this love stuff many times before. It's something of a blessing and a curse. Love sounds good and we all want to be loved, even when we're at our worst, but the problem is that when we read in the Bible that we're to love others, most of us think of the meanest, most cantankerous, offensive, obnoxious and unlovable person we know. Just the thought of loving that person makes our faces twitch and our stomachs churn. Yuk!

I'll tell you what. I've got a deal to offer you. Love someone else. Go ahead. Pick some Christian to love. Pick one you like. Pick one who likes you. Pick someone to love who has a high predictability of success. Get started with someone you want to love like a brother and move up to someone less loveable as a next step.

Okay, have you picked someone to love? Now what are you going to do? How are you going to love that person? Think of one thing you could do to express Christian love to someone else. Think of what you could do that would cause others to say, "Wow! Those Christians love each other like the best of brothers and sisters." Got it? You've picked someone to love. You've thought of something to do. Now . . . "*love as brothers.*"

Number four on Peter's "do good list" is compassion. The Greek word originally meant courage. Compassion is doing something courageous to help someone else.

In some ways sympathy and compassion are pretty much the same. They both have to do with feelings toward others. Perhaps we may think of sympathy more as the feeling and compassion more as the courageous action that flows out of sympathy.

We live in a time when it's especially challenging to be compassionate. We see so much suffering that we are desensitized. We hear about millions dying of AIDS in Africa and flip the channel to another newscast where we see body parts from a suicide bombing in Israel and then skip over to flooding or a school shooting in America. After awhile it's just news, not people. It isn't our problem. We lack compassion because we are so frequently exposed to the sights and sounds and stories of human pain. Compassion calls us to do something courageous for others. Get involved. Help out. Become engaged in the fight.

Recently I visited a church in Atlanta, Georgia, and heard about a successful businessman there, the founder and primary owner of one of America's larger fast-food chains. He builds his business schedule around teaching a Sunday School class of young teen-age boys each weekend. He personally visits in the home of every student. He has taught the same age class for decades, staying connected even after they get promoted. Often he gets jobs for his former students.

Last year he had a student who was one of nine children in one family. He visited their rental unit and got to know the family. He saw the inadequate conditions in which they were living and thought about the house he and his wife lived in—just the two of them in this great big house. He felt sympathy and then acted compassionately. He gave his home to the family. He figured they needed it more than he needed it . . . so he **gave** it to them. Not for publicity. Not for a tax deduction. Not to get anything in return. He just gave it to them. What a courageous, compassionate thing to do. That's exactly what the Bible is here talking about. It was a totally Christian thing to do.

Most of us can't give away a house but all of us can think and act courageously for the good of others.

Last on Peter's list on how to treat others is humility. This speaks to how we relate to one another in all areas. As Christians we should never speak with pride or superiority or arrogance or ambition.

Have you ever been treated really well by someone who proudly looks down on you with an air of

superiority? It's a humiliating experience. Some people love to play the game of being better than others. Even when they're doing acts of kindness that seem generous it's always to make them look better.

As Christians we are never to have that type of arrogant, superior attitude. We are to keep our eyes on Jesus Christ. It is then that we become keenly aware of our own frailty and mortality. We realize that we are human creatures who are no better than anyone else.

This past week I was surfing through the television stations and came across the end of a sermon by a Roman Catholic priest. He was talking about humility and he said, "Humility is not being selfless; humility is less of self." That's exactly right.

One of the top selling business books in America is Jim Collins' Good to Great. In it he identifies those few American companies that move from being good to becoming truly great by sustaining quality while giving investors long-term return on their investment. He and his researchers from the University of Colorado in Boulder analyzed what caused this to happen. They found that a key characteristic of great companies is "Level 5" leadership. This is the executive who "builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will."

Collins explains that the top-level business executive who is humble demonstrates a compelling modesty, shunning public adulation, and is never

boastful. This person acts with quiet, calm determination. He or she relies principally on inspired standards, not inspiring charisma, to motivate. This executive channels ambition into the com-

pany, not into self, and sets up successors for even greater achievements in the next generation. She or he looks out the window, not in the mirror, to apportion credit for the success of the company to other people.

How very Christian and biblical. Change a few words and you have pretty much what 1 Peter 3:8 is talking about. The very best leaders of America's very best companies are those who fit the description of Christians in 1 Peter 3:8.

*As Christians we should never be insensitive to the plight of others.*

Peter goes on to say in 1 Peter 3:9, “*Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.*” In other words, when people insult you, be nice to them. When someone gives you evil, give them good. If you are a Christian, be a blessing to others.

This is no call to absurdity. It does not suggest letting others abuse you or take cruel advantage. It is not contradicting the value of tough love. It is simply a forthright call to always treat others well.

Why? Because God is watching! Peter believed that the best advice is biblical advice so he quoted from the Old Testament, Psalm 34:12-16, when he wrote in 1 Peter 3:10-12:

*Whoever would love life  
and see good days  
must keep his tongue from evil  
and his lips from deceitful speech.  
He must turn from evil and do good;  
he must seek peace and pursue it.*

*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.*

That’s me! That’s you! We want to love life and see good days. But how do we do that? We need to watch our mouths and pursue peace . . . because God is watching! We aren’t just good to be good. We’re not even just good for the sake of others. We’re good for God! We believe that our lives are under God’s supervision and blessing. The highest delight of our lives is to please him. “*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.*”

God is watching. That’s not a threat; that’s a blessing, a marvelous promise. We have a God who is engaged in what’s happening. He’s not watching to check up on us; he’s watching in order to bless and benefit us. God listens to our prayers and says, “Treat other people right in the midst of difficulties and I’ll help you . . . in terms of harmony, sympathy, love, compassion and humility.”

God is on our side!

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