July 18, 2021

Rick Myatt

PEACE INITIATIVE

1 Peter 3:8-12

A couple of years ago National Public Radio had a story that asked the question, “Do you want to feel happier today?” It focused on what current scientific studies are revealing about how to achieve that, and the answers are somewhat surprising. The story cited a recent study from the University of British Columbia in which they asked subjects to enter a busy coffee shop and purchase a beverage. Half were asked to simply to go in, buy their coffee and leave. The other half were asked to strike up a conversation with the cashier as they bought their caffeine fix. Then they asked the participants some questions following that transaction. They discovered that people who had struck up a conversation left the store in a better mood than those who did not, and they also felt a greater sense of belonging in their community. In other words, they were a little bit happier. Other studies revealed that commuters who interacted with other passengers on trains and buses were happier afterward, even when they believed they would prefer solitude.

There is something about connecting with other people that has a significant effect on our level of happiness in life. Today as we look at 1 Peter 3:8-12 we are going to see some verses that point us in a very different direction than people usually look for the pursuit of happiness.

In these verses Peter says we should be sympathetic, compassionate, humble, that we should love others, we should bless them, even when they are doing evil to us. Clearly this is a radically different way of living than we mostly encounter. Who repays insults or evil with blessing? That is not the normal human reaction. On the rare occasion my amazing and remarkably kind and gracious wife says something in an impatient tone of voice because I have done yet another stupid thing, my first reaction is usually not, “Oh, bless you, dearest heart of my heart. You are such a delight to me.” But Peter tells those of us who believe in Jesus that we were called to respond like that and that doing so is how we inherit a blessing! It is the path to a blessed life. To be like that at all times is a demanding and different way to live. It’s just hard sometimes. Given that, why should we choose to live this way?

OUR MOTIVATION IS LOVE FOR LIFE

It is common when we encounter verses that tell us to do things like be sympathetic, compassionate and loving, return blessings for insults, to think that we must do these things to gain or maintain God’s approval. But that’s a tough way to live. How do you know if you have a passing grade? You’d never be able to relax because you wouldn’t know if you’d done enough.

The greater concern with that idea is that it is contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ. If it is within our ability to gain or maintain God’s love and acceptance, then Jesus did not need to die for our sins. He would have just come and told us to try harder and do better. Peter said in 1:4-5 that in Christ we have an inheritance that can never perish and that is shielded for us by the power of God. That’s a done deal. It has already happened. So it does not hinge on our ability to be sympathetic, compassionate, loving, and humble.

I’ve been enjoying watching the Padres this year. For the first time in a long time San Diego has very good baseball team. When I watch them I actually expect them to win, as opposed to most of their history during which I usually thought, “I wonder how they’re going to lose this game?” One of the reasons this team is good is Manny Machado. He is an outstanding player in the field, and he can hit. But early in the season he was scuffling. He was not getting on base or driving in runs much. But he has a contract that guarantees he will get paid $30 million every year for this year and 7 more years after it, on top of what he has already been paid. What if he suddenly turns into a pumpkin who can’t hit his way out of a wet paper bag? He still gets $30 million a year through 2028. What if he plays third base as badly as a broken down, ancient Rick Myatt? He gets $30 million every year. It’s a done deal, regardless of what he does. Now in the NFL players sign contracts for millions of dollars. But there’s a big difference. If an NFL player suddenly turns into a pillow, he can be cut and he doesn’t get paid another dime. Here’s a hugely important question. Do you think having an inheritance from God is more like Manny Machado, or an NFL player? Well, we are shielded from losing that inheritance by the power of God, so I’m pretty sure it’s more like Manny’s deal. It doesn’t rely on our performance! Given that, why care about trying our best to be the kind of people Peter described here? If we are secure in our standing with God, and failing to measure up won’t matter at all, what’s our motivation?

There are a couple of reasons for seeking to do what God says. One is simply gratitude. We’re so thankful to God that we want to do what he tells us to do. But there is another aspect of our motivation in these verses. Peter quoted Psalm 34:12-16 in these verses, and tucked in there is a very important message about motivation for living as God instructs us. Look at verses 10-11. “Whoever would love life and see good days, must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good.”

Peter was using those verses to back up his instruction that we should be like-minded, sympathetic, loving each other and compassionate. What he was saying is this is what anyone who wants to love life and see good days should do, because these are the ways that happens. In other words, if you want to love life, then be sympathetic, be compassionate and so on.

What does it mean to love life? What do we mean when we say that a person loves something? My son, Toby, loves surfing. Even though his life has been absurdly demanding these past 10 years with almost zero time for recreation, he has found time to surf. He loves it so much that when he was in college he surfed even in the winter up on the central coast where the water was so cold that when he duck dived through a wave it felt like getting hit in the head with a hammer. It meant sharing the water with the great white sharks that hang out there.

When Toby says he loves surfing it means he is happy and content when surfing. He chooses it and enjoys it whenever he can, still to this day. He did it even when dealing with the insane demands of medical school and then medical residency, where he was little better than an indentured servant. So a person who loves life is happy and content with his or her life. That person chooses life and enjoys it.

This cannot mean a person is happy and content because their circumstances are so good. We tend to think we would say we are loving life because it is so great, because everything is just the way we would choose. I’ve even heard people say, “I’m loving life right now” because their circumstances were so good. That was not true of the people to whom Peter wrote.

Their situation was difficult. Many were slaves, almost all of them were poor, they were ostracized and oppressed. Peter would later describe their situation as a “fiery ordeal.” They were suffering. If they were to love life it wasn’t because they loved their circumstances. It had to be in spite of them.

This is good news because we can’t exert enough control on the world to ensure that our lives will always be the way we would like them to be. Laurie and I once had some friends who had enough resources that they were mostly able to force life to be the way they wanted it to be. Until life threw them a heartbreaking curve that no amount of resources could stop or fix. There was nothing they could do about what turned into an unrelenting grief that continues to this day. We are all going to have down times, hard times, and the good news is that we can continue to love life whether it is a down time or a good season. Love for life is on the inside, it doesn’t come from the outside in. It was possible to be a slave, be rejected and ostracized by one’s community, even face the possibility of harm, and still love life!

What do you think a person will be like if they love life? I suggest there are some things that will be true of them regardless of their personality.

**Content**

Go back to my illustration of my son loving surfing. When he is out there on the waves, because he loves it so much, he’s not wishing he were somewhere else. He’s happy where he is. He’s doing what he loves. A person who loves life will be happy, content where he or she is. They may not be happy with some of the circumstances they face, but they can be content and happy in other things in the middle of the circumstances.

In Philippians 4:12 Paul wrote, “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty and in want.” Psalm 118:24 in the New American Standard translation says, “This is the day which the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” That’s loving life. That’s saying that today is a gift from God. It is what he wants me to have, so I will be glad with this day. I will be content today.

On March 25, 1979, a man named Dennis Waitley had a ticket to fly from Chicago to Los Angeles on American Airlines. He was behind schedule and was late getting to the airport. They closed the boarding door just as he got to the gate. He pleaded with the airline employees to open the door and let him on the flight. They refused. He begged, to no avail. He was upset. The plane hadn’t left, but they would not help him. When the plane backed away from the gate he headed to the customer service counter to register a blistering complaint. He was really upset. That was about to change. While still at the airport he got the news that as his flight, American 191, was taking off, the engine on the left wing broke off, causing a drastic imbalance of aerodynamic forces, resulting in loss of control of the aircraft. It crashed 1.6 miles from the end of the runway, killing all 271 souls on board. Had the airline people let him on the plane he would have died in that crash. He has kept the ticket from that flight and has framed it. On tough days, one look at that ticket completely changes his perspective. He sees every day as a gift.

For us it shouldn’t take a close encounter like that one to remind us of that truth. This is the day the Lord has made. It is a gift from God. We are where he wants us today. As we remember that we can be content, no matter what else may be happening.

**Fully Present**

If we do that, if we are content and happy where we are, then we won’t be wishing we were somewhere else. We won’t be looking forward to something in the future, or fretting about something we fear might happen. We won’t be longing for something in the past. We will be fully present right where we are. Ecclesiastes 9:10 says, “Whatever your hands find to do, do it with all your might.” Wherever you are, be all there. Throw yourself totally in the moment. Someone who loves life is going to be like that. Being content with what God has given me today, I will do today with everything that is in me.

Man, is that ever a needed concept today. People today are more distracted than at any point in my life, and that covers quite a few years. Instead of being in the moment they are looking at their phones to see what is happening somewhere else, or what someone else is doing or saying. We’d all be a lot happier if we just put the phone away and lived in the moment wherever we are.

The famous 19th century American evangelist, Dwight Moody, said, “I believe the religion of Christ covers the whole man. Why shouldn’t a man play baseball or lawn tennis? Don’t imagine that you have got to go into a cave to be consecrated and stay there your whole life. Whatever you take up, take it up with all your heart.”

**Joyful**

If we love life, will be joyful. Someone who loves surfing is going to be joyful while surfing. Someone who loves life is going to be joyful while living it. I’m married to a person who loves life, and I see this pretty much every day.

I recently recalled one of those moments when I saw this in Laurie. We were on vacation with our kids before they got married. The place we were staying proved to be unsatisfactory in the extreme, so Laurie managed to find a better place for us to stay. Unfortunately, by the time she had that worked out we were right up against check out time. So we had to throw all our belongings in suitcases and bags in a rush. We didn’t have time to pack efficiently. Then we headed down to pack all our stuff in the rental car. This place only had space for about 4 cars by the entrance, and it was on a busy street. So we were stressed by trying to cram all our stuff, including a surf board into this car. To get the board in we had to put the front passenger seat all the way down and lay the board on top of it. That meant Laurie, Carissa and Toby all had to cram into half of the back seat. Plus they had to hold suitcases on their laps. Because it took so long cars began backing up at the entrance. It got backed up into the street and started blocking traffic. A hotel employee came over and said, “Sir, you have to move your car because you’re causing a traffic problem.” I already knew that. Situations like that cause me to seriously stress. I was sweating bullets. As I got in the car I saw Laurie crammed into a tiny space in a corner of the back seat with stuff piled on her, and she was laughing. She found the whole thing hilarious. She said she thought we looked like the Beverly Hillbillies hit Hawaii. She loves life.

That’s what loving life is like, and we all want that. We want to love life regardless of our situation. But how do we experience that? Gritting our teeth and telling ourselves to be happier won’t help. Peter shows us how we can love life.

OUR METHOD IS TO PURSUE PEACE

He tells us in verse 11 that the person who wants to love life must turn from evil, seek peace and pursue it. That’s not a four step process. It is not, “step one, turn from evil, step two, do good, step three seek peace, step four pursue peace.” He means that this is basically all one thing. Live a life characterized by turning from evil, doing good and pursuing peace. This is a way of describing what he said in verse 8, being sympathetic, compassionate, loving, returning blessing for insult because of what God has done for us. That’s how you can love life. Actively pursue peace. There are a lot of other things you could do in life, but this is more urgent. Don’t get distracted or sidetracked by something less important. Make it your priority.

But isn’t peace one of the fruit of the Spirit? Don’t we have it by living in the Spirit of Jesus? Yes, we do. Well what does Peter mean then? Actually, there are two aspects of pursuing peace that you can see in these verses. The first is about having peace with God. Peter says in verse 12, “the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.” This is the key to having peace. It is knowing that the Lord’s eyes are on you at all times and he is listening for your voice in prayer. He cares about you. He is listening when you talk to him because he is a Father who cares for his child.

That fact impacts our ability to live in peace in two ways. One of the main factors in lacking peace is our disconnection from God. Being separated from God is the biggest disruptor of peace for all humans. Many years ago Laurie and I had a moment in our marriage that was so memorable we have never forgotten it. After almost 42 years a lot of individual moments in marriage kind of blend together and fade from view in the mists of time. But this was one of those few that stick out. Late one night as we went to bed we had a disagreement. We were making zero progress in settling it, and emotions were getting a bit intense. I felt that because it was late and we were both tired we weren’t handling it well. When you’re tired and it’s late you tend to be less clear in your thinking and more emotional. So I said, “Laurie, I think we need to put this on hold, get some sleep, and try to work it out tomorrow.” She insisted that we needed to resolve it because she wouldn’t sleep if we didn’t. But I knew that, being as tired as we were, we weren’t being objective. I said, “I’m not going to argue about this anymore. We can’t deal with this tonight in a good way, so we need to go to sleep.” I turned out my light and tried to call it a night. Laurie said, “Well I’m not going to be able to sleep.” So she got out of bed and went downstairs. I know now that I was supposed to follow her and try to resolve the problem. I didn’t know that then, so I drifted off to sleep. Sometime later I was awakened because the bed was moving. It wasn’t an earthquake. Laurie was jumping up and down on the bed to wake me up. She said, “I can’t sleep until we work this out, so neither are you.” We resolved the problem.

When there is a problem in a relationship with someone you love, it will nag at you. That’s how it is for every human being who is separated from God. They can go about their lives, but there will be a sense that something is off. It will nag at them and cause them to feel a sense of darkness or foreboding. It will mean that real peace is ever out of reach.

However, we can’t resolve that problem of being separated from God through our efforts. We are guilty before God. We all know it. We all have that sense of guilt. We struggle with a sense of not being adequate, of not measuring up, not being worthy of being loved by God. But in 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul wrote that in Christ we are new creations, the old has gone away. In verse 18 he said, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.”

God did the reconciling. He fixed the problem. That’s why Jesus died for us. He restored the connection. He was the only one who could do it because we can’t. So now, according to Romans 5:1 we have peace with God through Christ. Does God really love me? He can and does, because he has done completely for us what we could not do for ourselves. He has reconciled us, brought us back to him, restored the connection, forgiven us and totally accepted and loved us.

To pursue peace we must continually go back to the truth that when Jesus died, he finished the job. We are totally loved, accepted and reconciled to God without reservation, because Jesus has taken care of all of that. To pursue peace means continually going back to this truth, reminding ourselves of it, and basing our thoughts and lives on it. That is a big part of what it means to live by the Spirit and thus have the fruit of the Spirit, including peace.

But there is another aspect of having peace that relates to God. It means because God is with us, loving us, looking out for us, because his eye is always on us, we can be at peace with what happens in our lives. The late Christian writer, Oswald Sanders, said, “Peace is not the absence of trouble, but the presence of God.”

Another great Christian writer, George MacDonald, wrote, “What if the rain be falling and the wind be blowing? What if we stand alone? Let us think to ourselves and say to our friend, ‘God is. Jesus is not dead. Nothing can be going wrong, however it may so look to hearts unfinished in children.” Jesus is not dead. Nothing can go wrong.

We recently moved our worship service to a new location. That introduced uncertainty into my life in the form of all kinds of “what if” questions. What if people can’t find the location? What if they can’t figure out where to park? What if it is too difficult for us to set up our music and sound equipment in this place? What if people don’t like meeting there? Here’s the answer to every one of those questions and many more besides. “Jesus is not dead. Nothing can go wrong, no matter how it looks.” When I believe that, peace is the result.

We pursue peace by driving ourselves back to those truths about our God and our relationship to him. But there is another aspect to pursuing peace. It is the horizontal aspect of peace with other people. That is very much in view in these verses. Peter tells us to turn away from evil and do good by being sympathetic to people, by loving them, by having compassion for them, by humbling ourselves before them. Remember the point of Laurie jumping up and down on the bed. When there are problems with other people it interferes with peace and contentment.

Laurie and I have never had a lot of arguments, and when we’ve had them, they’ve been pretty calm affairs. We are in a phase of life now where we don’t have very many. A friend some time ago asked me about that. He wondered why we don’t seem to fight much. I thought about it, then told him that some of that is because we are a lot alike, so we agree on most things. But there’s a larger and more important reason. It is because in our relationship we have valued loving each other, valued peace and unity. Whatever we might disagree about, to us it is of no importance compared to loving each other and being one with each other.

That’s what Peter means when he tells us to pursue peace. Whatever thing we might disagree about, whatever thing we think we want, it does not matter nearly so much as loving the other person. That certainly is easy to understand in the context of marriage. Am I going to be happy with the result if I dig my heels in, do battle to get my way, win the fight, and in the process crush my wife, the one who has given herself to me and whom I promised to love until I die? Talk about winning the battle and losing the war. Peter tells us pursuing peace should be what happens in all of our relationships with others.

CONCLUSION

The startling and rather radical summation of this passage comes down to this:

***The way to love life is to pursue peace!*** It is crucial that we grasp this one truth. It is so crucial and so counterintuitive that I need to repeat it. The way to love life, which we all want to do, is to pursue peace. It is not to be rich, not to be beautiful, not to be powerful, not to control everything and everyone around us. It is to pursue peace. Peace is what every human desires. It is essential to loving life. If we are at peace, we can love life even if we are in crushing circumstances.

LIVE IN THE REALITY OF GRACE

We will never be at peace anywhere in our lives unless we are at peace in our hearts. That peace starts with being rock solid certain that we are loved by God without condition, and that we are loved forever. It is to make the grace of God given to us in Christ, the basis of everything we think about ourselves, God, and other people as well.

LIVE UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYE OF GOD AT ALL TIMES

Life is so uncertain. We’ve had some stark reminders of that recently. We’re still not done with a global pandemic caused by a virus no one except the few virologists who study such things had ever heard of. We all have seen the story of the condo in Florida that collapsed. It appears now 150 people who were sleeping in their condos and had no warning were killed. There are no guarantees in life.

In order to pursue peace we will have to feel safe, which is hard to do in a world that is not safe, but is terribly uncertain. We can only feel safe by reminding ourselves always that God is watching over us. Bad things can and will happen, but in the end, somehow God will make it all come out right. We trust in him working, not in our ability to protect ourselves. The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous. In Christ, that means you.

A crucial component to peace is being in awe of God. Dacher Keltner at Cal Berkeley says awe is “the feeling of being in the presence of something vast or beyond human scale, that transcends our understanding of things.” It is triggered by a perceptual or conceptual sense of vastness. Recent research reveals that being in awe helps us experience peace. Awe has been shown to lower blood pressure, enhance a sense of well-being, strengthen our immune system and make us more cooperative with others. Jennifer Stellar, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, says that awe is huge in helping us be at peace and, in her words, “quieting the ego.” It lessens stress. Living with awe of God’s vastness, his greatness, his holiness and his majesty, helps us be at peace.

VALUE LOVING OTHERS

We pursue peace by choosing to be sympathetic, compassionate, humble toward others, by loving them, by blessing them regardless of what they do to us. The simple, profound truth is, ***the more we love others, the more full of life we will be***, the more we will love life. Conversely, the more we focus on ourselves, the less we will love life. I repeat, the more we focus on self and serve ourselves, the less we will love life. Jesus told us that a long time ago.

A story in *The Washington Post* just two months ago related that health care workers who are administering the covid vaccine are reporting that giving the vaccine is its own reward. One said giving the shot brings hope to people, and so it became “a joy to all of us.” Corrie Robinson, a nurse in D. C. said doing the job has buoyed her spirits. She says, “I say quite often, this is probably the most important thing I’ll ever do in my career. Sometimes it’s a little overwhelming.” The point is, doing good to others, helping them, bringing them hope, brings joy and fullness to life. There is a profound and fundamental truth that Jesus taught. Life is about two things: loving God and loving people. That’s what Peter is telling us. If you want to love life, pursue peace. Drawing upon God’s love for you, pour out sympathy, compassion and love on others