

Carry On Living

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, we're going to look at four lessons from this last section of First Peter. And the first is the importance of spiritual friendship. Oh, that's appropriate today.

The importance of spiritual friendship. There are two people mentioned in this last section that Peter is acknowledging and giving thanks for with the help of Silas, or Silvanus, whom I regard as a faithful brother.

I've written to you briefly. And then also he brings greetings from, we'll go on to speak about the church in Rome, but also from his son Mark, not his literal son, but his son in Christ, his brother in Christ, as it were.

And we recognize that friendship was really significant and important to Peter. It's important to Paul also, these great apostles of the faith.

Silas had been a great encouragement and a great help to Paul also. And he's mentioned several times in Paul's epistles. And Mark, we know, relied a great deal on Peter, who wrote this letter.

[1 : 0 6] Mark relied a great deal on Peter for the information that was able to give him the ability to write the gospel.

And so there was this great companionship and great friendship, great partners in the gospel. And sometimes I think we think of Paul and we think of Peter and their great champions of the faith and their great strong Christians.

They don't really need friends. Friendship's not that important because they had Christ. They were so close to Christ. And yet even Christ himself makes clear that he needed friendships.

And Christ himself in the garden asked that they would, you know, pray with him. And they had this inner circle of friends, the Son of God, God who was in trinity with Father and Holy Spirit.

And his humanity needed the friendship of those fallen, broken, sinful but redeemed Christians, believers in his life. And so we find that same pattern of spiritual friendship being greatly significant and monitored and mentioned here at the end of his letter.

[2 : 1 8] And can I apply that to our own lives, the significance and the importance? We all know the significance and importance of friendship generally.

Our prayers today are testimony to that. But beyond that, the significance of spiritual friendship, companionship, kindred spirits, people who embrace your spiritual DNA, who know what it is to be a Christian and who will enable you, as we think back to the beginning of what Peter has said and what I said at the beginning, enables us to persevere, enables us to keep going.

You know why we struggle so much as we become middle-aged so often in the faith, even not if it's middle-aged in the age? It's because we don't have that strong, powerful Christian friendships to enable us to be encouraged and built up in our faith.

Tremendously important for you as young people to look out for and reach for and develop and pray about friends who are going to be strong spiritual friends, who are going to encourage you in your Christian faith, with whom you can be in teamwork, with whom you can be serving for Christ.

And I'm not primarily speaking either about the Christian community as a whole or even marriage at this point in terms of intimacy and friendship, but generally, friendship, spiritual friendships, do you have somebody that is a spiritual friend to you?

[4 : 04] If you don't, pray for that. Somebody that you can be open with spiritually, that can be honest with you and you with them, someone that will do and encourage and drive you forward in the faith and you them.

So friendship is hugely significant for us. Don't shy away from that. Don't avoid that. Don't only seek friendships in the world.

Friendships in the world will happen and are significant and important, but they will never be for you what you need spiritually, or the people to whom you will be accountable and to whom you can recognize as faithful brothers and sisters.

We are not called to be islands. I've said that too many times here. Isolation and loneliness, massive disincentives to live the Christian life.

Massively difficult. God has placed us. Spiritual beings in family and in friendships, it reflects his Trinitarian being and we are to know and to recognize and to deliberately pray for and look for and develop Christian friends who will be like Silas and Mark and Peter together in their Christian lives.

[5 : 43] I acknowledge today the great debt that I owe to Tom and the work that he's done here over these last three years, but also just for the friendship, spiritual friendship that we have developed, being able to study together and being the study together to bear burdens spiritually together and to have friendship together.

I thank God for that in the task of leadership. I look forward to working with Neil on a part-time basis. Neil and I have been spiritual friends for 30 years.

I never dreamed this moment, daft moment would come when we'd be working together in the work of the Kingdom. I thank God for the friendship that we have had and shared and will continue to have and will, I hope, will blossom in the gospel work here as we are accountable to one another under Christ and as we share one another's burdens.

Friendship, hugely significant and important in your Christian lives. Develop friends that you will keep for life, that will be with you through thick and thin, you will be with you and with Christ between you.

Develop these things, spiritual friendship. But also, and in many ways all these points are linked to the spiritual encouragement. He says in verse 12 there after introducing Silas says, I've written to you briefly encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God stand fast in it.

[7 : 22] Encouragement's a great and a solid and a powerful theme throughout the New Testament and here Peter unveils his motive for writing the letter. I want to encourage you, I want to build you up, I want to point you towards the things that you need to know spiritually, the truth, the grace of God that is so significant and important for you and the encouragement stand firm.

Encouragement's a great thing, it's the opposite, is it not of, of, maybe not the direct opposite, but it becomes the direct opposite in many ways of gossip, of discouragement, of self-righteous judgmental spirit within the Christian community, harsh judgment.

Discouragement is so often a self-centered thing where we feel we need to lord it over people or somehow point out others' failures and faults and weaknesses so often that we are exalted.

But encouragement, spiritual encouragement is Christ-centered and focused on the needs of others. What do we do when we encourage people?

Just at a general level, what do we do? I think we encourage people when we spend time with them. When we persuade them of things that are important and things they should or we think they should be doing or maybe warning them when we feel they're as friends going down a dangerous route, we encourage people by our example, by our experience, we share our maturity or our experience of God.

[9 : 03] By our honesty, we encourage people. We encourage people by our objectivity, we stand back and we can speak into their situation sometimes as by way of encouragement.

We can challenge those that we know and love. And that can be encouraging. Someone cares enough to tell me the truth. Someone cares enough to tell me I'm going down a dangerous and worrying route.

Encouragement can be praise. Praise. We're terrible at praise. We're terrible at pointing out something that someone's done really well, maybe particularly in our Presbyterian heritage.

We say we're afraid of pride or we're afraid of taking away the glory from God. Not so we give glory to God by encouraging and by building up people when they do things that have been helpful and spiritual and good and right.

So these are some of the encouragements generally. And Peter in pen is encouraging not only his readers but also through the Spirit.

[10 : 15] He's encouraging us by setting out the truth. And that's hugely encouraging. He says, this is what grace looks like. This is what you're going to experience.

This is some of the tough testing that you will face. I'm encouraging you because this is what God says will happen and He says, I will hold you and I will take you through this.

Stand fast. Recognize and see what the Holy Spirit is saying beyond the suffering and the difficulties. See the work of God.

See the testing of your faith. And then work out how you can work grace into your lives, into your marriages, into your homes, into your work. And be encouraged by these things.

The facts about Jesus. What's the greatest thing we can do in our Christian lives is be encouraged around Scripture, around the truth of Scripture.

[11 : 10] We mustn't disregard that. We mustn't think it's insignificant. We mustn't think that it's all about experience.

The experience comes from knowing the God who is revealed in Scripture and knowing the character and the way he deals with us. He's close, he's intimate, but he's also transcendent.

And the only place we can find out about him in that way is through the revelation he gives of himself in Scripture. So Peter encourages us to know the true grace of God as it's revealed in this and throughout Scripture and to stand fast in it.

Why? Because we're tempted not to, middle age. That's when the temptation is, you're young, you're energetic, you're fresh, you can stand fast, you're strong.

There's always temptations in middle age and the faith to give up on that persevering spirit, the standing fast, the holding on, the keeping going in this battle, in this race, we're tempted to forget the power that we have, the transforming power, the Holy Spirit power that enables us to keep going.

[12 : 33] And sometimes we begin to look at ourselves and we think it's up to us. I've been a Christian so long, I'll be able to keep it going on my own. We stop praying, we stop relying, we stop focusing on Jesus.

Okay, spiritual encouragement, hugely significant, related also to spiritual friendship. But then there's spiritual partnership for one of a better description.

Verse 13, she who's in Babylon chosen together with you sends you her greetings, as does my son Mark, greet one another with a holy kiss. Now, it seems to be that Paul, Peter here for whatever reason is choosing to use code language, Babylon being a term that seemed to have been used to describe Rome.

And so we recognize through studying even wider sources than Scripture that Peter would have been in Rome as he wrote this, and Mark we believe was in Rome also.

And he was with the church that was in Rome. So he talks about the church ascribing to her feminine qualities as the bride of Christ, he who's in Babylon chosen together with you sends her greetings.

[13 : 55] He's bringing church greetings to them and also the greetings of Mark, and encouraging the churches that will meet together, the churches that he's written to, the churches that occasionally will come together that are scattered throughout the world, that they, when they meet each other, greet one another with a holy kiss.

He's encouraging greetings, interest, warm affection towards one another, knowing unity, expressing unity, and both of these things are hugely significant for us in our church and our Christian lives, that we have a sense of spiritual partnership, that we have a wider Christian interest you'll see throughout the New Testament church, and we've seen it in Acts that there was not just individual churches springing up and being self-absorbed and doing their own thing, they cared about what was happening in other places, they prayed for one another, they collected money for the church in Jerusalem, and they did lots of things and they met together and came to theological decisions about stuff.

And so we recognised there was a great sense of partnership, and that wider Christian interest is hugely important in our Christian lives.

The congregation today here is testimony of that. We're an eclectic bunch, we're from all over, and we have people from many parts of the world that we are connected to.

So the Christian faith and the Christian walks not just about my life, but we're so self-absorbed in this society, we can do everything without leaving our computer screen, almost.

[15 : 36] We have all these friends, but have no contact with people. And here we have this wider Christian, it's not just my life, it's not just my congregation, it's not even just my denominations, the kingdom of God, to which we belong.

And I give thanks today that as a congregation we have a free church family that we can pray for, we can pray for the situation in Thurzel where the minister has died tragically of cancer and we can go and visit the church in Dunfermline and support that as a church plan, and we can send a team to Campbelltown and we can raise funds for Kilmally in their new building.

We can meet three or four times a year with the other churches in Edinburgh and worship together the other free churches. We can be in gospel partnership with six or seven different denominations and independent churches for the sake of the gospel.

We can send people out to Nova Sebrisk in Siberia with gospel greetings. We can send our brothers back to the States and they can bring their greetings to their churches from us, because we're not just about our own independent individual selves.

We recognize ourselves as a spiritual partnership and the gospel is being blessed throughout the world. You see where Suraj comes from, the gospel is growing faster there than anywhere else in the world in Nepal.

[17 : 01] We give thanks, we have that union and that link and that interest and that knowledge of what is happening with the gospel. We have a wider Christian interest. We also have and remind ourselves of the importance of warm affection, greet one another with a holy kiss now, that's not in our tradition.

We are strict doer, presbyterians and I don't expect you all to kiss one another before the end of the service or that I'd have no objections. It depends of course who is kissing you, who, you?

I don't think he's even here. A holy kiss, I'm not sure what defines a holy kiss, we're not sure, but maybe in our tradition a holy hug is a good thing.

A warm handshake, something that intimates warm affection and care and delight in the other person.

Unity, expressing that unity in a real and tangible and viable and physical way so that people say, these Christians, they do love one another and they care for one another.

[18 : 15] I think sometimes stiff formalism has had its day and we need to show our Christian joy and delight in one another as we greet one another with a kiss of love or whatever the culture equivalent will be for us in our lives.

It's that commitment, it's that openness, it's that time, it's that energy, it's that expressed joy in one another's company.

Surely that's good, surely that's right and biblical. The last thing I want to mention that Peter mentioned here is spiritual peace.

He speaks about encouragement and partnership and friendship but also peace. He finishes with that great benediction, peace to all of you who are in Christ.

As I was preparing this, I was thinking of introducing this last point by saying, well, that's a great request, we all want peace, we all want peace.

[19 : 19] They want a fight but then I realized that's not strictly true. Probably of all people, sometimes Christians display a willingness to fight and to be at this peace with one another than any other group on earth.

Why that might be the case, I don't know. Some folk love confrontation. Some folk love taking their Bible the heavier, the bigger, the better and making sure that everyone feels it their way.

Many people use God's name to promote confrontation within the church, within the community of God's people.

Christ reminds us that the theology of the cross speaks about reconciliation and peace. Now I'm not for a moment saying that truth doesn't matter, not for a moment saying we don't honestly debate about matters of importance, but childish, self-centered, demanding of our rights away from Christ and the cross and the peace that He brings is not a characteristic of Him.

Grace and peace. We are called to peace through Jesus Christ. We've been reconciled with God and the evidence of that is how we are reconciled with one another. Yes, there's differences, yes, there's struggles, yes, there's problems, but the reality is we work through them with grace.

[20 : 51] We work through them with honesty. We work through them with spiritual friendship, encouragement and partnership and we do so because we recognize that is how we grow and that is how we develop and that is how we mature in the faith.

Grace and peace. We are friends with God. The enmity has been removed. That reconciliation is to show itself in the way that we deal with, primarily what I'm speaking of here is a congregational level with one another in our community of believers, how we deal with personality clashes, how we deal with theological differences, how we deal with strategy in the direction of the church, how we deal with sinful behavior, how we deal with all these things, we recognize that we take Christ into that and we seek His will and we seek His peace to prevail as much as it is possible for us to do.

But we recognize also He wishes on His people a spiritual peace of friendship with Him. It's a peace that transcends understanding.

It's a peace that is miraculous from Him that we know is friendship and we know our conscience still because we know He has died for us.

Where do we know this peace? Where is your spiritual peace? He summarizes the whole letter, these last two words, in Christ.

[22 : 30] That's what I'm saying to you, young people. That's what I'm saying to us in our middle age and to those who are in the evening of their days, in Christ.

That's the summary of all my advice that I could ever give to a people of God, in Christ. That's where we find peace.

That's where we should be by faith. You'll find your wisdom and your grace and your perseverance and your strength in Christ. As we receive Christ as Lord and Savior, we know His reconciliation with God.

And what are you hoping to base your friendship with God today? If you died this evening, on what would you base your qualification to enter into His nearer presence in heaven?

It must be based on being in Christ, trusting in Christ, hidden in Christ, living in Christ, persevering in Christ, following Christ, knowing His peace, that peace that comes because the enmity has been dealt with on the cross.

[23 : 52] You know what it's like when you fall out friendship-wise? There's a barrier. And that's what it's like, isn't it, with God? The barrier's there until it's removed in Christ.

What are you relying on? Goodness, faithfulness to a denomination, Bible knowledge, family in Christ.

See, sometimes I think we want spiritual peace and all its benefits without looking into the pure and holy face of Jesus Christ.

We want peace on our terms without submission to Him as Lord of lords, King of kings.

Submission to His grace, which is divine grace. And that applies at every aspect of our lives. So my prayer for the congregation as I loosen my pastoral oversight for three months, I'll not be here, I'll not be worshiping the congregation, I will to all intents and purposes no longer be your minister.

[25 : 05] I'm in the lust of that as Billy Graham takes over as Intermoderator and I want to pray for Billy and for Neil, who will help him and for Tom, who will be working also.

But as I do that, my prayer is that I and all of us know God's peace. No one else can give it.

No one else can take it away. It's His peace. And as we come to Him, we know that. That we would understand the foundations that Peter's spoken of here, especially can I say that to the young people?

To those of us in middle age, can I say persevere? That's the word I say. And to those in old age, finish well. Our finish is well here, may that be the truth in our Christian lives as we finish also.

Put Him first in Christ. Let's bow our heads and pray. Lord, I ask and pray today that as we come to an end of this wonderful spiritual letter, so relevant, so contextually important for us, so spirit-filled and so simply living because it is the word of God.

[26 : 24] May we be courageous and energetic and determined to relate to Jesus Christ through His word and apply His word to our lives, to be filled with the Holy Spirit, recognizing our great need of His power and grace and transforming energy in our lives, and enable us Lord to above all be in Christ daily, that we would read Your word, that we would focus on spiritual friendships, that we would be people of encouragement to one another, that we would not just leave everyone to their own devices, that we would be in partnership both locally and nationally in the gospel work, that we would know Your peace, which transcends all understanding.

Bless Billy, he takes up inter-moderatorship duties here in the congregation. Thank you for him, for his work and witness and his willingness to serve in this way. And we have Neil who will support him and Tom also who will be working particularly with the team who arrives from America.

We pray for your blessing on the team and on the work they will do. Pray for your blessing on the Christian Heritage Center that begins in June and on Paul and his team as they work throughout the summer.

And we pray and ask for an outpouring of your Holy Spirit that our prayers that we have been praying in May will tangibly, visibly and in reality be answered for our encouragement and for our learning and teaching.

And Lord God that you would guide us. So may you speak to each of us in the power of your word today and may we be challenged, particularly any who might be here today who don't know you as Lord and Savior, who may be relying on a thousand different things that are perfectly legitimate from a human point of view but are worthless before God.

[28 : 26] May they come to put their living trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and remain in Him, who died for their sins.

So Lord God here as we ask and pray in Jesus' name. Amen.