

# Christian Character shaped by Grace among the world's people

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'll do turn with me, if you would, to a passage that we read together, Romans chapter 12. Which it seems to me is a passage all about what it means to be Christian citizens shaped by grace, living among the world's people.

The Christian gospel is not just what we believe, it's what we do. Because it's not just what God says to us, it's what God has done for us and is doing in us and with us.

And as we've seen in Romans, all that God foreknew, he is conforming to the image of his Son, says chapter 8, verse 29.

That he, Jesus, might be the firstborn among many brothers. In other words, that God's kingdom will be filled with multitudes that no one can number who are transfigured into the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that transformation, although we must wait, as chapter 8 says, with groaning for its completion when Jesus comes in glory, that transformation has begun now.

[ 1 : 13 ] And through the life of God's Spirit within us, we are being transfigured into what one day we will be permanently forever.

We're being led now in the righteousness of grace for glory. And therefore, as Paul begins in Romans 12, verse 1, true worship has at last begun.

Not songs and sacraments and sermons and things like that, but the living sacrifice that God truly desires of his people. Christian character shaped by grace for glory.

And Christian churches, likewise, together, living by grace for God's glory. But furthermore, this middle section, as I've said, in the middle of these two chapters, tells us that worship is being lived out now in the real world, marking us out as citizens, Christian citizens, who are being shaped by grace for glory.

And these verses show us what that means. First of all, living in submission to God's sovereignty and in submission to God's providence among this world's peoples.

[ 2 : 25 ] And then, as we'll see next time in chapter 13, the first seven verses, living in submission to God's providence under the world's powers that God himself has placed over us.

So this is all about what worship means for real Christians in the real world. And we're going to think about that today. The first section, verses 14 to 21 of chapter 12.

If we're to be true worshippers in the real world, then that means we need to be very realistic and very clear-headed, says Paul. And that's what these verses really help us to be.

They show us the heavenly way of honourable witness in a hostile world. So the first thing that Paul wants us to be very realistic about, about our worship and witness among real people, is that it pits us up against a hostile world.

The real world, says Paul, is an evil world. This world is predominantly a place which is hostile to Christ, which hates his gospel, and therefore which will persecute his church.

[ 3 : 36 ] Just look at what Paul assumes here in these verses. Verse 14, there will be persecutors. Verse 17, there will be those who do evil to us.

Hence the need for this command, not to repay evil with evil. Verse 18, there will be those who don't seek peace, but want conflict with us, and it will not always be possible to live in peace.

Verse 19, there will be those who do grievous evil to us, that calls out for vengeance. We shall have enemies, verse 20.

In verse 21, evil will very often threaten to overcome us. And you see, nearly every single verse draws attention to the fact that there will be hostility to the people of God here on earth.

Because the real world is an evil world. It's astounding, isn't it, when you read the writers of the post-enlightenment world in the late 19th century, when the thinkers and the opinion leaders of the Western world really believed that humanity was evolving into the age of great peace and perfection.

[ 4 : 48 ] That's what they thought. Whether it was the optimism of the great advances in science, or the growing wealth due to trade, or the idealism of philosophies like Marxism and so on, that's what they believed.

But what an illusion. Indeed, what a delusion. That kind of thinking was proved to be by just the calamitous wars, the genocides, the catastrophes of the 20th century.

And yet, still today, so many people still seem to believe, don't they, that sentimental folly, that man, mankind, are basically good at heart. If only we could all be allowed to express ourselves, be freed from all the shackles, then the world would somehow become a perfect place.

Friends, that is utter nonsense. Just try and go through an airport today to get on a plane with all the security and total body pat-downs and x-ray scanners and all the rest of it.

And that tells you that man is not perfect at heart. Think of the ever-increasing avalanche of laws that there are, legislation on the statute books.

[ 5 : 56 ] Because constantly, there are more and more evidences of the evil in the heart of man that need to be curbed by laws and governments. Out of the heart of man, said Jesus, comes all manner, not of good, but of evil.

And we know that, if we're honest. The real world is an evil world. And therefore, it's hostile to the good God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who reveals him.

And therefore, his church, who represent him. In fact, so clear was Jesus himself about this that he said to his followers, Woe to you, woe to you, when all the world speaks well of you. Because so they did of their fathers, the false prophets.

In other words, what he's saying is, when the world is not hostile to the church, when it loves the church, it's because it must be a false church. So it tells you something, doesn't it, when a paper like the Guardian newspaper hails the decision of our General Assembly this week.

Woe to you, when all the world thinks well of you. No, said Jesus, the world will always be hostile to the true Christian church. In the world, you will have tribulation, he said.

[ 7 : 09 ] John 16, 33. You will be hated for my name's sake. If they call the master of the house, Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household, he said in Matthew chapter 10.

Or in John 15, verse 18. If the world hates you, said Jesus, know that it has hated me before it hated you. Now friends, we've got to be realistic about that.

That is what Jesus constantly taught his followers. It was what the apostles constantly experienced. We saw that when we studied the book of Acts. Constant, vitriolic opposition to the ministry of Paul from both the pagan establishment and, often worse, from the religious establishment.

There were many in that establishment that took a vow even never to eat again until they had killed the apostle Paul. And so here, and in all his other letters, when Paul talks about this, he knows exactly what he's talking about.

But notice how matter of fact he is. That struck me as I was studying it this week. There's no hysteria, there's no hand-wringing in what Paul says here. There's been a lot of that among evangelical folk this week about our general assembly.

[ 8 : 26 ] But friends, I don't think we should be like that. It's no surprise to the scriptures that many in the professing church will abandon the truth and promote error. That's the only reason that many of the New Testament letters had to be written in the first place.

Wouldn't have had them if that wasn't so. And I know, says Paul, you just need to calm down and remember that the New Testament tells us how to react properly to all of these things.

Listen to Jesus in Luke chapter 21. It might be worth you just turning this up. It's very important. Luke 21, page 881 in the church Bibles. Listen to verse 12 of Luke 21.

They'll let our hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons and you'll be brought before kings and governors, secular authorities, for my name's sake.

Verse 16. You'll be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends and some of you they'll put to death. You'll be hated by all. For my name's sake, said Jesus.

[ 9 : 31 ] Do you see? In the world you will have hostility. Great hostility from civil authorities and ecclesiastical ones. But does that mean that God has lost control?

Well, of course not. Look at verse 13 of Luke 21. Right in the middle. What does he say? This will be your opportunity to bear witness.

Evil in the world, hostility to the church and to his gospel doesn't mean an end to the witness of the church, but it means opportunity to bear witness, says Jesus.

And we saw, didn't we, all through the Acts of the Apostles how true that was. And we know how often throughout history also that has been true. There's that business quip, isn't there, that says there's no such thing as challenges, only opportunities.

Well, that isn't true. Jesus says there will be challenges. There'll be great challenges, grievous challenges in a hostile and evil world. But in these very things, he says, painful as they are, there will be opportunities for witness.

[10:48] I think that ought to encourage all of us very especially this week, don't you think? How are we to pray in the current circumstances? Well, like this, Lord, whatever happens, whatever stand we might have to take in ecclesiastical courts or even secular courts, or even ending up in prison like Paul, may there be opportunity to bear witness to Jesus.

That's what Jesus tells us to pray. Lord, may we look back like Paul and say, what has happened to us has rather served to advance the gospel as he says to others praying for him in Philippians chapter 1.

I think that would be a help for us in our prayers this week, don't you? But you see, what Paul is saying here in Romans chapter 12 is really that the whole of life, not just particular situations, but the whole of life in a hostile world is going to be our opportunity for witness.

Not just in words, but also in deeds. We saw that last time in Romans 13 verse 12 that if we cast off the works of darkness, says Paul, the ways of this evil world, and if we put on the armor, literally the weapons of light, well, we're fighting the battles of the Lord.

We're using our godly Christian lifestyle as a weapon for righteousness. In other words, the very way we live among the peoples of this world is a witness to the light of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[12:22] So how then are we to live in this evil world among people who are at best disinterested, but often, in reality, very hostile to the gospel of Christ? Well, secondly, in these verses, Paul says, in every way we are to live so as to have an honorable witness.

And we do that if we recognize that real witness and responsible witness to the Lord means not escape from an evil world, but thorough engagement in this evil world and among its people.

There's a great temptation, isn't there, for Christian people who see clearly the ungodliness of the world around us. There's a great temptation to want to retreat into holy huddles, to go away to a place of safety and a Christian subculture, an ever-decreasing circle, so as not to be contaminated by the leaven of this world.

But friends, that's the very opposite, isn't it, of what Jesus taught. We are to be the leaven, he said, spreading through this world, spreading good. We're salt and light. Not to be hidden away under a bushel, but to be set on a hill to give light to others.

And that's exactly what Paul is saying here in these verses. Be engaged, he says, in the life of your neighbours, your workmates, your fellow students, everyone who you live among. So verse 15, rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

[13:51] That means being included in these people's lives in a meaningful way, in friendships, in associations, in all kinds of different ways, part of the communities that we live in.

Of course, these words apply also to those of us inside the church and how we relate to one another, but verse 14 really does change the focus quite dramatically to the outward pagan world, the world of hostility and evil.

And he's describing in these verses Christian believers who are not escaping from real life, but who are engaged in the real life of this world, who are sharing all manner of experiences with our neighbours.

He's talking about us going to the funerals of our friends and our colleagues and showing genuine love and concern and care for them. Even if we find it very difficult because maybe it's a humanist funeral and we think that's awful.

But don't stay away on that account. He's talking about us visiting our friends and our neighbours in hospital, helping the family of a sick person, not just because they're a Christian but because they're a person.

[15:02] He's talking about giving comfort and support to people. The person at work who's had a miscarriage, weeping with them, showing that you love, that you care, being engaged in the joys

and the sorrows of life.

As well as giving genuine joy a place in the great joyful things of their life, marriages and retirement parties and birth of babies and all these kind of things.

Rejoicing when your colleague is promoted. It's hard to do that, isn't it, when you've not been promoted? No, don't harbour envy and bitterness in your heart but show real generosity.

I'm so glad for you. Don't just say it, let it be real and be seen. And the same goes, I think, for rejoicing in the many, many good things that are all around us in an evil world.

Gifts that God has given to all. The sun that Jesus says the Lord makes to shine on the righteous as well as the unrighteous. Even sometimes in Glasgow. See, the sun's just come out.

[16:09] But you see, some Christians can have a niggardly attitude, can't they, to even good things in the world. They just consider them ungodly. Anything is worldly that's not strictly Christian.

But that's not what the Bible means when it tells us to love not the world. There's great beauty, there's great joy, there's loveliness in so much that God has given in his common grace to all humanity.

And we're not to despise these things. We're to engage and enter into these things with the people of this world. There's music, there's sciences, technology, medicine, psychiatry, all of these things that benefit all and benefit us.

We're not to despise things because they're not Christian. The same with public life and politics as well. These are things, as we'll see next week, that God has given for the blessing of this world.

We're not to withdraw and escape. We're to be engaged in the joys and the sorrows. We're not to insulate ourselves from all things not Christian.

[17:18] No, we're to be in the world, says Paul, in among its people, sharing in their lives and the joys and the sorrows along with others. So, verse 16, you see, we're not to be haughty.

We're not to be aloof in any way with a superior attitude to those who are not Christians. No, we're to live in harmony with others. He says, literally, we're to think the same towards one another.

In other words, we're not to think of people who are not Christian as though they're inferior or different. Now, you know, don't you? We all know that there's nothing, nothing that turns people off more than a snooty and censorious attitude.

People hate that, rightly so. Snobbishness. But Paul is saying, no, we're to be the very antithesis of that kind of attitude. Not haughty or conceited, but he says, you're deliberately associating even with the lowliest of all.

Now, wasn't that what delighted people about Jesus Christ? They said to his disciples, look at the kind of people your master hangs out with. But the common people heard him gladly.

[18:29] They delighted that he would hang out with just such as them. Now, the whole letter of Paul to the Romans has been all about destroying any sense of superiority, hasn't it?

True gospel grace, says Paul, excludes all kind of boasting whatsoever. Do you remember chapter 3? Where is our boasting? It is excluded, says Paul. Think back to chapter 11.

It was all about saying that there could be no superiority over Jewish Christians, over Gentiles, or vice versa. No, he says, all of you are to stand in awe. All of you were disobedient.

All of you have received together the same mercy of God in Jesus Christ. Remember verse 3 at the beginning of chapter 12 that we looked at the other week.

There's to be no superior thinking among you in the church but a sober self-assessment. Well, same here with your pagan neighbor, says Paul. Never be conceited. Don't be the kind of Christian who tut-tuts about what your non-Christian neighbors do.

[19:33] It's so easy to do that, isn't it? Some parts of Scotland it's focused on the Sabbath. Oh, isn't that terrible? They do their shopping on a Sunday. Or it could be marriage.

Oh, they're not married, you know. It's disgraceful, isn't it? Their children are born out of wedlock. Single-parent families. It's not that we think that these are healthy things.

Of course we don't. But Paul is saying to us, don't be conceited. Don't be haughty. Think the same way of others as you think of yourselves. If we do know better and think we know better, it's only because God has had mercy on us.

It's only because we've had the privilege of the light of God's words to bring health and blessing.

And we should want to share that with others for their blessing, not for their condemnation.

Of course we want to commend marriage. Of course we want to promote it. But we do it because we care for people. We know it's the best way.

[ 20 : 39 ] We desire the best of them. Not because we're conceited. Not because we want to be priggish and think of ourselves as better. No. We have to be careful in church. Paul says here, associate with the lowly.

And we can make it hard, can't we? If people feel that we're acting or even that we're dressing in a superior way to them. Make them feel their lowliness.

Well, James has trenchant things to say about that, doesn't he, in chapter 2 of his letter. You can dress up for church in a superior attitude, can't you? So that you look down the noses of those who are less smart than you.

Of course you can also dress down deliberately in the same superior attitude and look down on others who don't dress down the way you do. It's not what you're wearing, but it's why you're wearing it and for whom you're wearing it.

There's something simple like that. It's what you wear when you come to church. Is it to give respect to God and to give respect to others in the church? Give respect and thought to those who are outsiders, who are visiting?

[ 21 : 43 ] Or is it for yourself and for your own ego? Being conceited, having a haughty attitude?

No, that's the question. Does it help or does it hinder harmonious good relations among ourselves and with outsiders in particular in what we do in all kinds of different ways?

That's the question. Well, Paul says in all of these ways and a hundred others besides, we're to engage meaningfully in the lives of those around us and that means there can be no snobbishness, no anti-snobbishness either, which is really just the same thing.

Now, of course, as verse 17 indicates, there will be times when we do clash with an evil world and its ways that's opposed to God's laws. Genuine love, as verse 9 reminded us, genuine love abhors evil and there will be some who do us evil.

But Paul says we're not to get into a tit-for-tat mentality, we're not to stoop to that level. He says we're to give thought in verse 17, literally give forethought to what is honourable in the sight of all. Now, not everyone will agree with our stance on certain things, necessarily, but we're to be humble and we're to be honourable in the way that we do what we must do. So, for example, Paul writes to the Ephesians and says to them, take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

[ 23 : 11 ] And Peter says, likewise, that we'll often be maligned when we don't join in the sensuality and the sexual immorality of this world and so on. He says that in 1 Peter 4. So there are inevitable clashes, there are inevitable disagreements, of course.

We must expect these things. And we must, as Paul exposed, darkness. But the attitude that we have and the reason that we do expose these things is what's crucial.

It's not to be out of conceit and self-righteousness. It's not to be about boosting our own religious egos. But rather, it's to be out of a genuine heart of love and concern to do good to others for their blessing and for their protection.

I would put it this way. We're to have a persuasion mentality, not a protest mentality. Our desire is to be to do good and to win people to Christ, not to denounce people and write them off.

That's the difference, isn't it? That's the difference between the Fred Phelps approach of protesting. You know, that infamous family and church in America who stand outside bases with big plagiarts saying dreadful things like, God hates faggots.

[ 24 : 27 ] Now, that is honourable in no one's sight. No true Christians, not the world and certainly not the sight of God. But a complete difference is something like, for example, the True Freedom Trust, which is a ministry to give genuine support and counselling to those who are struggling with same-sex addiction.

Honourable in the sight of all. Even though, of course, the most twisted anti-Christian zealots will always find a reason to denounce even what is honourable.

But we are to be honourable. And verse 18, we are to be in peace with all, wherever it's possible, as far as it depends on us, says Paul. And that is great realism because it's not always possible.

And it's not always in our power. John Calvin rightly reminds us of the caveats that Paul says here. We're not to strive for peace so as to avoid being hated for Christ's sake.

No. Nor are to become complicit in other people's sins for the sake of peace. No, that is dishonourable, not honourable. We need at times, he says, to fight courageously.

[ 25 : 36 ] Of course we do. But Jesus said, blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God. And that means that we should be prepared personally, wherever possible, wherever it does truly depend on us, to forgive a great deal, to tolerate a lot of things personally for the sake of peace, whether it's with neighbours or workmates or family members or whoever it is.

So that trio, that Lelandia hedge that's shading your garden, well it's not worth a fight in the courts with your neighbour. Or that extremely difficult person that you have to work with that seems to have a major personality disorder.

And it's very hard, isn't it? As far as it depends on you, if it's possible, you have to live in peace, even with that person. It's not always possible and things do upset peace often very badly and Paul is realistic.

And wrongs will be done to us, things that call out for justice. So what then? Well, says Paul, the way of honourable witness is that we must submit as Christians at all times to the heavenly way. The heavenly way. Paul says, there is a place for wrath, but it must be heaven's proper wrath, not our personal wrath. Verse 19. Beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God.

[ 27 : 10 ] Now verses 19 and 20 tell us clearly what we are not to do and why and then what we are to do and why. In fact, three times in this passage we have these words, do not, in this command.

Verse 14, do not curse our persecutors. Instead, we are to bless them. Verse 17, do not repay evil for evil but deal honourably with all. And thirdly here, do not avenge yourselves.

Do not take personal vengeance for all the ills that others might do to you. It is very clear, isn't it?

There is to be no vengeful chasing or cursing or doing evil to those who do evil to us.

Notice though, Paul is not saying and this is important, he is not saying that is because evil things don't matter or that there won't be any justice or judgment, quite the opposite. He says it is because it is God's will to see proper judgment.

It is His wrath and it will not be escaped. Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord. I won't forget. Quoting from Psalm 32 where God assures His people that He will vindicate them from all their enemies in the end.

[ 28 : 19 ] Now friends, the desire for justice that we have is a deep-seated desire and it's a right desire. But personal vengeance isn't justice because always we're far too personally involved, aren't we, to see straight.

John Calvin says, we're always far too indulgent of our own faults but ruthless about other people's faults and we're therefore consumed for the desire for revenge whenever we suffer even the slightest injury.

Isn't that true? But no, we're to trust God and His sovereignty in this. As in all else, we're to leave it to His ultimate justice.

And that there will be. Remember Revelation 19 as Bob was preaching on just recently. The day will come when all wrongs are put right, when God will avenge all wickedness and all injustice.

All evil will be burned up forever. And on that day, the saints of God will shout, hallelujah, and they'll rejoice. But you see, while I'm still in this sinful body and have this sinful mind, I'm still far too mixed up in my motives to rejoice purely like that in judgment, to rejoice with holiness about judgment.

[ 29 : 40 ] So I'm not to usurp God's place or think that I can. Now there is, of course, the temporal justice that God has given into the hands of the properly constituted authorities of justice.

We'll see that next week. The magistrate who bears not God's sword in vain, who is his servant. But even then, says Paul, it's possible, isn't it, to pursue proper legal procedures but still have a heart that is festering and seeking vengeance.

Again, John Calvin, I find him very, very helpful, I have to say on these passages. I recommend his commentary to you. He says that that really is no different from seeking revenge oneself.

If legal action arises, he says, from personal feelings and not from the pure zeal of God's spirit, we do not make God our judge so much as our servant in our own corrupt desire.

And that's true too, isn't it? It's not just that we're to go to court and use the proper legal procedures. It's we're to have the right attitude of heart, not be vengeful even in that. Now, personal revenge is not to be anywhere in our hearts.

[ 30 : 49 ] We're to leave such things to the wrath of God, says Paul. So what are we to do instead? Verse 20. To the contrary, he says, if your enemy is hungry, feed him.

If he's thirsty, give him something to drink. How absolutely counter-cultural that is, isn't it, to our nature? Here's Calvin. Although there is hardly any who has made such advance in the law of the

Lord that he fulfills this preset, no one can boast that he is a child of God or glory in the name of Christian who has not partially undertaken this course and doesn't struggle daily to resist the will to do the opposite.

Because that is, friends, heaven's way here on earth. That is the way of Jesus Christ. Our enemy here isn't somebody that we hate. It's somebody who has hated and has ill-treated us.

And that's why it's so extraordinary. Now don't mistake it. He's not being sentimental here. Paul is not saying go and arm your enemy, go and help your enemy to make it worse for you and walk all over you.

Don't be silly. He's not saying that. What he's saying is that if you come across someone who has so abused you like that in need, you are to show great love and help to them, not scorn.

[ 32 : 12 ] That was the good Samaritan, wasn't it? It was a Jew beaten up on the road, a Jew who hated and scorned Samaritans. A classic sectarian hatred. But he fed him and watered him and tended to his wounds and loved him.

Well, so for us, says Paul. The one who hurt you, who cursed you, who's ill-treated you. If they're in distress and in need, if it's life-threatening, you must show them that love and that care.

Now, we all like to think that's what we would naturally do. Let me tell you, that is not what we naturally do. It's very hard. What about the former spouse or the abusive parent who's afflicted such damage on you emotionally, scarred you, perhaps for the rest of your life.

But you find them in a state of need and distress. Can you do that? Or the bitter opponent in another way who's made your life so miserable who's now very sick and is in need.

I once faced a great struggle in that personally in somebody who had caused me great pain and trouble who'd cursed me to my face and my wife which was even worse.

[ 33 : 34 ] And suddenly, indeed not long after that, he was suddenly struck and taken desperately ill and I found him in the intensive care unit on a life support monitor. Let me tell you, I find it a very, very great struggle to go and to pray with that man and to pray for his healing.

So that's what the Lord Jesus told me I must do. Why are we to act this way, says Paul? Well, in verse 20, he says that the immediate reason is that by doing so we will heap burning coals on our enemy's head.

Quoting there from Proverbs 25. What he means is the unexpected and very surprising kindness shown from somebody who he's hurt will certainly have an impact on that person.

At the very least, stinging his conscience over what he's done to you. But perhaps, even softening his heart towards you, bringing about a change of heart.

Perhaps even reconciliation. Perhaps even his evil will be overcome by what you do. And verse 21, you see, really sums up the whole passage.

[ 34 : 48 ] Yes, we do live in an evil world, hostile to God and to his Christ. But we are called to be engaged in this evil world, not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome that evil by, not evil, but good.

That's how evil, that's how hostility are overcome, says Paul. Through the love of Christ, that work, tangibly, invisibly, through his people, through us. Listen to what Peter says in 1 Peter 1, when you suffer for doing good and endure, it's a gracious thing in the sight of God.

For to this you've been called, he says, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example that you might follow in his steps. We're called, says the New Testament, to follow in the steps of suffering that redeems, suffering that overcomes evil, suffering that brings people to God.

We're called, says Paul, to the Philippines not only to believe in Christ, but to suffer for Christ's sake, engaged in the same conflict with evil that Paul was engaged in.

Fighting to overcome evil, but not with the weapons of this world, not ever, but with the weapons of light. As we also, together, walk the way of the cross.

[ 36 : 14 ] And in doing so, display the power of the cross. That his love, the love of Christ, might touch others also. We, says Paul in 2 Corinthians, for we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also might be manifested in our mortal flesh.

So death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. Evil overcome by the glorious good of the gospel of Jesus Christ, made flesh in his ambassadors.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. It's no accident, I think, that when you read about Stephen's martyrdom in Acts chapter 7, that we're told that stood there watching was one Saul of Tarsus, approving, cheering on all that happened.

And Stephen, of course, was very bold and very courageous. He hid nothing of the truth. You stiff-necked people, he called them. You resist the Holy Spirit just as your fathers did. Courageous. Truthful. And yet, just like the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross, Stephen prayed, even as they stoned them, Lord, forgive them.

[ 37 : 42 ] And oh, the fruit of those burning coals festering away in Saul of Tarsus' head. Remember, he wrote to Timothy later, I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent opponent.

But I received mercy, the grace of the Lord overflowed from me. Evil, overcome by good. Friends, we do live in a hostile world.

And it seems that in coming days we may face increasing hostility from an increasingly worldly church. It's interesting, by the way, just to note in the passing that the one exception made by our Lord and the apostles to this command never to curse was when they were faced with those who claimed to speak in the name of God but instead perverted the truth of God.

Paul cursed the false teachers, didn't he, in Galatia and other places. Jesus cursed repeatedly the scribes and the Pharisees. Read Matthew 23 seven times. Because, he said, not only do you refuse to enter the kingdom yourself, but you hinder others from doing so.

Read Matthew chapter 18 and see his harsh, harsh words for those who cause little ones of his to stumble by perverting the truth, by leading them into sin.

[ 39 : 10 ] Well, it may be that the Lord himself has judged and departed from our institution, our denomination. It may be that it's not possible for us to live in peace, therefore.

It may be that we therefore do have to fight courageously for truth, for Christ and for his cause. If that's so, friends, let verse 21 be burned in our minds and our hearts.

Do not overcome evil by evil, but overcome evil with good. We're called always, whatever the circumstances, to have an honourable witness in this hostile world, the heavenly way.

May God help us and bless us and make that witness fruitful. Let's pray. Gracious God, your word is like a hammer and a fire.

It challenges us to the very heart of our being. it exposes the sin that is in our heart even when we are most on fire for righteousness. Lead us, we pray, in the path of the Lord Jesus Christ, of him who reviled not and cursed not, who was a sheep before his shearers was dumb, but through whose meekness revealed his majesty.

[ 40 : 43 ] and brought many to glory. So help us, Lord, to follow truthfully and graciously and lovingly in his train.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen.