Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

If you watch sports, you will have seen athletes with Phil 4:13 on their wristbands. And that is a reference to Philippians 4:13, which says, “*I can do all things through Him who strengthens me*.” So, these Christian athletes believe that they can shoot the magic three pointer or score the last minute try through Christ who strengthens them. But that is an example of a text being taken out of its context. What Paul was speaking about was being content in the face of hardship and being thankful when things were going good. He was not talking about professional athletes doing something that would get them on ESPN’s Plays of the Week.

Sadly though, taking texts out of context is a big problem in the wider church. It is basically how every sermon works with health and prosperity preachers on TV. Go to your local Christian bookstore, and you will find cards and wall hangings and photos and candles with texts that are taken out of context and turned into a general promise. It is also a big problem with a lot of modern ‘worship music.’ Not that long ago I was sent a link to a Youtube clip called ‘The Worship Song Song.’ It is a parody of many of the songs sung in churches today. And one of the lines of ‘The Worship Song Song’ is that you must include a lyric that is “an out of context Bible verse about hope” for your song to be popular and successful.

Well, our text today could be misused in that way, also. If someone wanted to write an article or a book about being a Christian, they could base it on verses 8-12 and say that being a Christian is just about being kind and loving and non-judgmental. And I am pretty sure that such a book would be very successful and appealing to many.

But is that what this text is saying? How does the context help us understand *what* Peter says here, *why* he says it here, and why he *emphasizes* these things and not others?

Well, as we have noted, Peter wrote this letter to Christians who faced daily persecution and hardship. And he wanted them to know how Christians should live in this situation. And that makes his letter relevant for all believers, in every age, including you and me, because Jesus said, “*In the world you will have tribulation … If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you*.” So, as with everything else in 1 Peter, the **general** **context** is **how Christians should live in the face of persecution and hardship**.

But in terms of the **specific context**, verse 8 begins with the word “***finally***.” And whenever we hear someone say, “finally,” we know that they are making their last point of a series of points. And that is what Peter is doing also. This section of his letter began back in 1:22: There we read Peter’s command that Christians “*love one another earnestly from a pure heart*.” And in 2:12, Peter’s command there was that we are to “*keep [our] conduct among Gentiles (or unbelievers) honourable*.” And all the way through to end of the letter, Peter just describes or explains or goes into more detail about both of these aspects of Christian living – love for our fellow believers and honourable conduct toward unbelievers.

And the first area of Christian living that Peter addressed is **specific relationships** – citizens to government, slaves to masters, and wives to unbelieving husbands. But “*finally*,” from here through to the end of the letter, his instructions are **general**, as we see with his reference to “*all of you*.” But these general instructions must be read with the previous relationship instructions in view. Peter was talking about very real persecution and hardship. Every time these believers left worship or Bible study, there was the possibility that they would not see each other again; that some members might be arrested by soldiers or even killed. Or perhaps some unjust and cruel master would beat a slave to death, as often happened in those times, which would mean that brother Joshua or Sister Lydia would not be at church next Lord’s Day. And when we talk about Christian wives with unbelieving husbands, they may have been one of two or more wives. They may have had harsh and inconsiderate husbands. And that would have made life very painful and difficult. So, it is in that context that the last section, the general instructions are given. Persecuted Christians, slaves with unjust masters, and wives with unbelieving husbands, need fellow believers who are like those described in verse 8, and they all need to be Christians like those described in verse 9.

So, with that context in view, let us see that **Christians, especially during times of persecution and hardship, must cultivate the right attitude toward Christians and non-Christians**. And verse 8 is about our attitudes towards Christians, verse 9 is about our attitude towards non-Christians, and verse 10-12 are simply the ‘Old Testament proof’ for Peter’s commands.

1. So, first of all, **our Attitude Towards Christians**. And Peter identifies five very closely-related attitudes here – “*unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind*.” Let’s take a brief look at each attitude:
	1. The first is “***unity of mind***.” In Greek, the world literally means ‘same-think.’ So, think the same, or be of one mind. And the call to believers to pursue unity of mind is one that is repeated many times in Scripture.
		1. In **John 17:11**, Jesus prayed this about believers: “*That they may be one, even as we are one*.” He wanted believers to enjoy the preciousness of unity.
		2. In **Philippians 1:27**, Paul describes believers as “*with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel*.”
		3. And in **Philippians 2:2** he says, “*Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind*.”
		4. And this involves both doctrine and practical living.
			1. Of **doctrine**:
				1. In **Ephesians 4:4-6**, Paul talks about there being “*one body and one Spirit … one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all*.”
				2. And in **1 Timothy 6:2-3**, Timothy was told: “*Teach and urge [sound doctrine]. If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness,*” he must be dealt with, quickly, or he will cause division in the church.
				3. So, we must pursue unity in doctrine. And that does not mean that we have to believe exactly the same things about every single point of doctrine as everyone else. For example, we might have different convictions than each other about drinking alcohol or vaccinations. But we must all believe that Jesus rose, physically, from death, on the third day.
				4. And as we saw last Sunday afternoon, this is why we are a **confessional church** – a church that holds to and uses creeds and confessions. We believe they enhance and promote and protect our unity of mind, because they summarize what we all believe about important doctrines, in black and white.
			2. But unity of mind is also about practical living:
				1. In **Acts 2:44-47** we have that beautiful description of the early church:

*And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved*.

So, believers did things together, like worship and Bible study, and they cared for those among themselves who were in need.

* 1. And we see more about this in the next attitude: “***Sympathy****.*” In Greek, the word literally means, ‘together feelings’ or ‘same feelings.’
		1. **Hebrews 4:15** says this of Jesus: “*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize* [same word] *with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin*.” Believer, Jesus sympathizes with you. He shares your feelings. He knows how life goes for you. He has felt what you feel. He knows the highs and lows of your life, because He lived on this planet, as a human being, for 30 odd years. So, if we are being made more and more like Him, we will sympathize with each other.
		2. **Romans 12:15** says, “*Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep*.” Boys and girls, do you know the shortest verse in the Bible? **John 11:35**: “*Jesus wep*t.” Do you remember why He wept? Because His friend, Lazarus, had died, and Lazarus’ sisters were heartbroken, and Jesus’ felt these awful consequences of the Fall. And so, He wept with His friends.
		3. And as we have seen, there would have been much opportunity for weeping among the believers that Peter originally wrote to, because of persecution and hardships. But there would also have been occasions of joy – births, marriages, recovery from illness or injury, etc.
		4. So, knowing how all of these things would make *you* feel, you draw alongside your fellow believers and you weep with them or rejoice with them.
		5. And that is **one of the worst things about lockdown**, isn’t it. We cannot hug each other or laugh and cry together. All around the world, believers have had no one, or very few, to share their joys and sorrows with. And the Lord knows that we need this. Pray that restrictions on gatherings will soon be removed.
	2. Well, the next attitude is “***brotherly love***.”
		1. And here we are being taken back to the word of **1 Peter 1:22** that began this section: “*Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart*.” And Peter said this because Jesus said it is what would define His people: “*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*.”
		2. And this also is a repeated chorus in the New Testament: **Romans, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, Hebrews**, and **2 Peter** all contain commands that we love our brothers and sisters. And as we noted in connection with 1 Peter 1:22, it is a major theme of **1 John**. For there we are told that if we do not love our brothers and sisters, whom we have seen, then we cannot love God, whom we cannot see!
	3. The next attitude is “***a tender heart***.” Other English versions have ‘compassionate.’
		1. In **Mark 1:40-41**, we read about the time when “a leper came to [Jesus], imploring Him, and kneeling said to Him, "If you will, you can make me clean." [And] moved with pity [same word translated here as tender heart/compassion], He stretched out His hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean."” So, Jesus’ feelings of pity/compassions were expressed in practical action.
		2. And again, if we have benefited the compassion of Christ, who healed us not of leprosy but from spiritual death and a deserved condemnation, and if we are eager to be more and more like Jesus, we will have a tender heart toward our brothers and sisters in Christ that expresses itself in a sympathy card or some baking or a hospital visit or a gift or a kind word or a hug or a cuppa at a café.
	4. Well, the next attitude we must have toward one another is “***a humble mind***.”
		1. In Philippians 2, believers are called to have the same mind as Jesus, who humbled Himself by coming down to earth to live as a human, and even to the point of dying on the cross. And in terms of what that looks like in our relationships with fellow believers, **Philippians 2:3** says, “*Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves*.” And this does not mean a false or fake humility that says that another person is better at maths than you, even though you score more highly than they do in maths tests. **Romans 12:3** says, “*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment*.”
		2. And what is in view here was captured well in a quote from Charles Spurgeon. I am paraphrasing a bit, but the gist of it was that when someone accuses you of wrong, don’t immediately rise up to defend yourself, instead, remind yourself that you are actually much worse than that person could possibly know.
		3. But that **doesn’t come easily and naturally to us**, does it. We can be so self-righteous and so self-defensive and self-promoting and self-centred. We naturally want to make things as comfortable and convenient for ourselves, as we can. But just as the Lord Jesus did for us, we must go out of our way and pour ourselves out for others.
		4. Have you ever been on the receiving end of an act of kindness or an apology from someone who later proved to be right in some misunderstanding or dispute? So, you thought they were wrong and that they ‘owed you,’ when it turned out they were right and that, if anything, you ‘owed them’! Only Christ leads people to be humble like this. But that is what should characterize our life together as believers.
	5. So, the question we must all consider is have we just heard a description of life in Avondale Reformed Church? And before you start thinking about that in relation to others, you must begin with yourself. It’s the old saying, isn’t it, when you point the finger, three fingers are pointing back at you. So, am I cultivating “*unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind*”? And we need the help of the Spirit of God to grow these attitudes. So, let’s all make these things a matter of concerted and repeated prayer – Lord, give us these attitudes toward each other.
1. But secondly, verse 9 lays out **Our Attitude towards** **Non-Christians**: “*Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing*.”
	1. In Peter’s time, justice in many cultures was pretty much of the ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ revenge system. If someone stole from you, a family member would hunt them down and steal the same from them. But among God’s Old Testament people, in accordance with the law, there had been the development of a justice system involving judges and ‘police.’ And as we see in **Romans 13**, Christians are commanded to uphold and respect elected governors, who are given the power of the sword to administer justice on behalf of victims. And that is a much better justice system than personal revenge, as you can imagine.
	2. But as with every human system, it was and is far from perfect. Sometimes the offender was not found or not punished. Sometimes there were injustices in the courts. And worst of all, sometimes it was the governors and judges and lawyers and police and soldiers who committed the crimes, who took your possessions or your home or the life of a loved one, as was the case with the persecution of that time. So, a **false assumption** of many of the early Christians was that they should take revenge on these crooks; that they should form secret vigilante societies that assassinated persecutors and governors, and tried to set prisoners free. But Peter corrects that wrong-headed thinking with what he says in verse 9.
	3. And why did He say this? **Because it is exactly what Jesus said**, as we read earlier, in **Luke 6**: “*Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets … I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you … love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil*.”
		1. And these words were a big part of Jesus’ message while He was on earth. They are the example He set for us, as Peter laid out in 2:21-25. And they are the example that the Apostles themselves imitated; **1 Corinthians 4:12-13**, “*When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat*.”
	4. So, what the Lord Jesus says to us and what we read in the Epistles is that persecution is an **opportunity for the gospel**. Although we will be tempted to hate our persecutors and want to injure or kill them, we must instead bless them. And what this means is that we offer them the gospel, with its promise of divine blessings, and call on them to respond to it and receive those blessings.
		1. Have you heard this saying before: ‘The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the gospel.’ Throughout history, the Lord has done amazing things through the testimony of persecuted believers in the hearts of their persecutors. It started with the Centurion who saw Jesus on the cross and professed faith. And then there is the jailer of Paul and Silas in Acts 16 who came to faith. And in **Philippians 1:13**, Paul said, “*It has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ*.” And you hear the same thing in the life testimony of Christians like Corrie ten Boom and Richard Wurmbrand – their persecutors became believers through their testimony.
		2. And this is the attitude we must have when persecution comes to us.
2. And to be clear that Jesus wasn’t inventing some new idea when He spoke about not repaying evil for evil, in verses 10-12, **Peter supplies Old Testament ‘proof’** of his message. And this is our third and final point, today.
	1. Verses 10-12 are a quotation from **Psalm 34:12-16**. And this is not the first time that Peter has referred to Psalm 34 in his letter. He did so also in 1:3, when he spoke about believers “*tast[ing] that the Lord is good*.” For that too is a Psalm 34 concept.
	2. And this quoted portion of Psalm 34 could easily be a sermon in itself, but that is not necessary today. What Peter is doing is just connecting the teaching of Jesus with the Old Testament. And these words are like so many of the Proverbs that set a general truth before us: If you want a good and happy and long life, then this is the way to live: Do good and do not do evil. Seek peace and pursue it.
		1. Now, this is a general truth. For example, Job was a righteous man, but he experienced much hardship and loss. The Lord Jesus was *perfect*, but He experienced constant poverty and mocking and rejection and eventual crucifixion. So, not everyone who strives to live a Psalm 34 life will enjoy a happy and long life. But of course, the promise and comfort of the gospel is that even if our life on earth is short and troubled, we go from here to eternal joy with Christ!
	3. And so, a key part of this Psalm 34 quotation is **verse 12**: “*For the eyes of the Lord are on* ***the righteous***.” Who is the only person who in and of Himself was and is truly righteous/perfect/sinless/worthy? The Lord Jesus Christ. When it comes to humankind, **Romans 3:10** says, “*There is none righteous, no, not one*.” But the message of the gospel is that we may receive the righteousness of Jesus through faith. When we repent of our sins and believe that Jesus died to secure the forgiveness of our sins, God gives us the righteousness of Jesus. And from that moment on, He views us as righteous in His eyes. And if we know and believe and understand that, then we will want to live with these attitudes toward *Christians* and this attitude toward *non-Christians*.

So, friends, are you a righteous one? Have you put your faith in Jesus Christ? If you have not, please do so today. And for the ‘ordinary’ hardships of life, and especially severe trials, like persecution, may the Lord make Avondale Reformed Church a 1 Peter 3:8-12 church. Amen.