

#3 – CREDIBLE LIVES (Hannah Heather)

- Where have you seen God at work in your life this week? (Share any brief examples and encouragements).
- Was there anything from Sunday's message which you found particularly inspiring or challenging?
- Was there anything else you particularly noticed?

I Peter 2:11-12 (NIVUK)

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans¹ that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

I Peter 3:15-16 (NIVUK)

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

1. Bishop of Kensington, Graham Tomlin has said:

'The church's first task is not actually evangelism, or getting the words right, but displaying the life of the kingdom in its own life and community, which in turn will provoke the questions that led to effective evangelism.'

We may be ready to give an answer as to why we have hope, but the real question is whether our lives provoke the question in the first place.

 - *Do people ever say, 'why?' about you? (I mean in a good way, not, 'why are you such a weirdo?')*
 - *What should other people notice that is distinctive about Christians? What do they expect to see that is different about followers of Jesus?*
 - *How can we display the life of the kingdom our own lives and communities?*
 - *Are there things we do as Christians that needlessly put people off? How can we be truly credible?*
2. The lifestyle of early Christians attracted followers to this revolutionary and countercultural movement, but, at the same time, Christians were criticized and persecuted because their lives challenged the power structures of Rome. Today the church has its fair share of critics. Canadian pastor, cultural analyst, and leadership expert, Carey Nieuwhof, writes, 'sometimes criticism aimed at the church is unfair. Other times, we shoot ourselves in the foot.' He suggests that there are 5 stupid things that we need to stop doing:

One. Being so weird online. Too many Christians come across as either toxic (angry ranters), cynical, or syrupy.

Two. Commenting on politics. When your church becomes a mouthpiece for a political party, you cease to be the church... When God happens to have all the same opinions you do, you're probably not worshipping God anymore.

Three. Handling conflicts so poorly. To handle conflict better, don't talk about other people. Talk to them.

Four. Ranking sin selectively. Sexual sin is not the only sin with serious implications. So does gossip, divisiveness, quarrelling, gluttony and envy. Don't pretend someone else's behaviour is worse than yours, confess your own sin.

Five. Judging outsiders. The world already has a judge. And it's not you.²

 - *What do you make of Carey Nieuwhof's analysis? Do you think the issues are the same in the UK as in North America? Or are we doing other stupid things?*
 - *What might it mean to, 'in [our] hearts revere Christ as Lord'?*
 - *What sorts of 'good deeds' might cause people who are not yet followers of Jesus to 'glorify God'?*
 - *What hope do you have as a Christian? Or are you just hoping for what everyone else is hoping for?*³
3. Jesus called his followers to bear witness to what they had seen and heard – indeed, to be his witnesses (Gk. *Martus*) in the world. Often attributed to John Wesley is the saying, "I set myself on fire and people come to watch me burn"⁴
 - *What might it mean for us to be 'set on fire'?*

¹ Gk. *ethnoi* = nations (in the sense of 'people groups', or 'ethnicities' rather than 'nation states'. Often translated as 'Gentiles')

² <https://careynieuwhof.com/5-stupid-things-the-church-needs-to-stop-doing-to-make-progress/>

³ More money, a bigger house, and a chance to retire in the sun, perhaps.

⁴ Although, sadly, there is absolutely no evidence in any of his journals, sermons, or other books that he ever said it.