

“STEWARDS OF GOD’S GRACE AND GIFTS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

June 12, 2016, 10:30AM

Text for the Sermon: I Peter 4:7-11

Introduction.

I am sure you have seen them. Those cartoons of a guy in a robe standing on a street corner holding a sign, “The end is near.” Or “The end is at hand.” I have never actually seen anyone carrying such a sign. And if we ever did I suspect we would laugh or at least smile that kind of smile that says we pity the poor diluted soul. No one would believe him.

But it is true. The sands of our time run out quickly. How near is the end of time for each of us? Why do Peter and so many NT writers refer to the end as near? Here we are two thousand years later and that doesn’t sound very near by our way of keeping time. Did Peter make a wrong prediction or did Peter know something we don’t?

In terms of human history two thousand years has been a long time. A lot of kings and kingdoms have come and gone in that time. But that’s where we are off. Peter and the NT authors aren’t thinking of human history. They are thinking of God’s history, of redemptive history.

In God’s eternal perspective there has been the creation, the fall, the covenant with Abraham, Moses’ exodus out of Egypt, the nation of Israel in the Promised Land, the exile to Babylon and the return, Christ’s birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the church.

There is only one event left in redemptive history, the return of Christ at the end of time, and it could happen at any time. Everything is ready. Spiritually, redemptively the end is very near in the grand scheme of things.

There is nothing else for us to expect or look forward to, except the coming of Christ. We really are literally living in the last days.

Peter’s statement reflects the radically different way he views the world and time. Christians who have his perspective and understanding of time, who realize Christ’s return is eminent will live and act different than those who don’t give it any thought.

“The end of all things is at hand, therefore ...”

Last week Peter said how not to live, don’t live like the Gentiles do. Gentiles live as if there is no tomorrow, as if there is no moral authority in the universe, as if there is no soon coming king to whom they must give an account. So how ought we to live?

They give themselves to drunkenness, Peter calls us to sober-mindedness.
They give themselves to lawless activity, Peter calls us to earnest love.
They give themselves to orgies, Peter calls us to show hospitality.
They give themselves to maligning others, Peter calls us to serve one another.

Jesus Christ and his imminent return changes everything or it ought.

Life together in the body of Christ, vss. 7-9.

Let's look more closely at the marks of a well-lived life, a life that is lived with the end in view.

Be self-controlled and sober-minded, vs. 7.

What does self-controlled and sober-minded mean?

Most of us when we hear the word sober think in terms of alcohol, but that's not the only way to be inebriated. We can be addicted to the things or pleasures of this world, to worldliness, to the things Peter mentioned in last week's text. This world is mind altering and heart altering. One of the greatest dangers all of us face is falling in love with this world and becoming spiritually dull and cold to the things of God.

The days are evil, the devil is active, life is short, the end is near.

Simply put Peter is saying we need to get our heads clear, we need sane thinking, thinking that is mature and correct. In chapter one Peter wrote about:

I Peter 1:13 ... preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this kind of thinking and living is so that our prayers are not hindered. How does life go without prayer? Not very good right, so we want our prayers to be effective.

We need constant doses of prayer reality to counter the mind-numbing effects of this world. I think it cuts both ways. Be clear thinking for the sake of your prayers, and pray so that you can be clear thinking and sober minded and have a right understanding of the realities of life.

Self-controlled, sober-minded, sane, mature thinking will serve us well in all of life, not just our prayer life. This will keep us balanced and effective at home, at work, reading the newspaper or responding to what is going on all around us. Keep your head in *all* situations.

How important is this? As important as anything that affects our prayer life. If our prayers are hindered, our supply line is cut, we are cut off from our strength and hope and help.

Think and pray and live and work and act in the light of Christ's return.

Have a sincere love that covers sin, vs. 8.

Let your love be *earnest*, unfailing, fervent. Ramp it up, don't be complacent in this. Don't let your affections grow cold. Peter is talking about more than the love we owe to each other as Christians even if we don't necessarily like each other.

This is intentionally stirring up affection. This is loving with the kind of love that covers over sin. How does that work? What's that like?

In a fellowship this size with this many different kinds of personalities and likes and dislikes there is bound to be lots of sin and offences and causes for disagreements or petty grievances. And not just petty ones, but even some big hurts.

Where love is lacking someone's comment may be taken wrong, someone's action misunderstood, someone's oversight or neglect taken personally. Before long bitterness, anger, dislike, hatred grows and strife and disunity and broken fellowship follow. And Satan smiles.

How can a fellowship this size full of this many sinners survive? Only one way.

Were love abounds and is in earnest, all of those things are overlooked, forgiven, forgotten, let go of. No root of bitterness can grow in the soil of love. Seeds of sin can't take root in the soil of grace and forgiveness.

Who of us here does not have many faults, many shortcomings? Who of us here has not said or done many things that we regret or wish we could undo? Who of us here doesn't need a lot of grace and a lot of forgiveness? Listen to the familiar words of Paul describing earnest love:

I Corinthians 13:4-7 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Are you striving to overcome and overlook minor offenses or are you holding on to grudges? Let your love cover many sins, over and over again, seventy times seventy. Let your love smother sin. As fire needs oxygen to burn, love sucks the oxygen out of sin and smothers it, puts out its fire.

Love one another. A life well-lived is a life lived for others and not for ourselves. A life with the end in view has no time for grudges, animosity, fault finding. Time is too short, be done with lesser things.

Showing hospitality, vs. 9.

Hospitality was crucial in an ancient world without hotels or motels. And it hasn't died in much of the world. Hospitality is still a common custom in most of the world, much more so than here.

Hospitality is an example of love, a subset. Earnest love will find expression in many ways and one of them is hospitality.

Let your hospitality be ungrudging. Why does Peter have to say that? Because sometimes hospitality is a burden or a hassle. You have to clean your house, you have to change your schedule. So without grumbling means without resenting the time, inconvenience or expense.

Grumbling is really a form of complaint against God who has brought circumstances and people into our lives. It drives out our joy, our peace, and our gratitude. It is rare to find a person who generously expends himself for the sake of another.

Galatians 6:10 So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Would you be willing to invite someone you don't know well for a meal or dessert or coffee? Would you be willing to extend yourself beyond your well establish circle of family and friends?

Why? Because we are God's people, because we share God's goodness. Because when you open your home you open your heart and when you do that incredible blessings flow. Because the time for doing good is short, the end is near.

I was made for this, the gifts of God for the people of God, vss. 10-11.

Earnest love finds another expression, loving others through our spiritual gifts. Serving one another with whatever God has given us.

What does the word *each* mean? It means each and every one of us as Christians have received a spiritual gift, a special enabling from God for the good of the body.

I Corinthians 12:7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Since each one of us has been given at least one gift, freely, by grace, without merit, we should use that gift just as freely for the sake of others.

When you use the gift that you have received by grace, that act becomes a channel of God's grace flowing to others. Are you one who thinks God's grace only flows through others, that you don't have any particular gift from the Spirit?

We all have at least one, and most likely more than one. There are varieties within each gift. For example, the teaching gift or the evangelism gift can find expression in a variety of applications. Each gift has many facets. Each is as richly varied as God's grace is richly varied.

Each of us has at least one gift, and no one has all the gifts. That means we are all indebted to someone else who has a gift we don't. God has purposely made us dependent on each other. We are to freely give and freely receive and encourage each other in both.

Remember the hospitality command? Remember the exhortation to do it without murmuring or complaining. Here is the ground for such a statement. Because all we have is from God, so how is it we grumble when we have to give up some time or expense for another. When we give we are not giving our own, but God's. We are stewards of His gifts and resources.

Being good stewards of this richly varied grace reminds us not to be like that steward who buried his gift thinking he was doing a good thing. The gift is given to be used with the confidence that the one who gave the gift will continue to supply us with what we need to exercise the gift.

You might remember two summers ago we spent the whole summer looking at spiritual gifts. There are several NT texts that give lists of the gifts. Peter summarizes them all with two words.

Speaking.

This is a broad term that isn't limited to teaching or preaching. It could be missions, evangelism, witnessing, counseling, singing, encouraging, exhorting.

What does "as one who speaks oracles of God" mean?

It doesn't mean what you say is inspired Scripture or directly from the mouth of God. It means when you speak, speak with a sense of seriousness or God-appointedness, as if your words were from God.

More simply, let each one exercise their gift with a sober sense of being engaged in God's work and service and not his own or for himself. Speak in a manner that reflects the shortness of time.

Serving.

This is another broad term with many varied applications and expressions. It can cover any kind of helping ministry. It's encouraging with our hands and feet and energy and presence rather than our mouth.

Again it ought to be done with a clear sense of God's provision. If we serve in our own strength and energy that will lead to pride. Serve in a way that shows you know it is by God's grace.

Implications and Applications.

The end of our text answers the so what. Peter ends with a doxology.

I Peter 4:11 ... in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

This is the ultimate reason for all we do. The end is near and this is the end of all things, the glory of God.

This is why Peter thinks the end is near. He saw the transfiguration of Jesus Christ in all His heavenly glory. He has seen the resurrection of Jesus Christ and he watched the ascension of Jesus Christ. He knows Jesus is seated on the throne at the right hand of God the Father who has given to Jesus glory and dominion forever and ever.

He knows that all that remains is for Jesus to return and make all things His. And Peter knows that in the scope of eternity, that remaining moment could be any moment.

The Christian understanding of history is that it is rushing toward a great and final consummation in Christ. A well-lived life is a life that is lived in harmony with the goal of history, that reflects where history is headed, which is toward Christ and His glory. And what does that look like?

In these last days may we increasingly be a praying and loving community.

Let us be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of more effective prayers.

Let us keep loving each other more earnestly for the sake of covering over a multitude of sins, and forgiving wrongs and tolerating our differences.

Let us show hospitality joyfully, giving out of what God has given, without complaining.

Let us serve one another because of all the grace you have received and because of the gifts the Spirit has given. Whether speaking or serving, we are instruments and vessels in God's hands for His glory, so do all that you do to the glory of God, through Jesus Christ who is coming soon.

Prayer: Holy Father in heaven, by your grace and the power of your Holy Spirit enable us to be clear headed and earnestly loving and hospitable, using all that you have given to us for your glory that the dominion of Christ may be extend, in His name, Amen.