

Good Stewards of Grace

1 Peter 4:7-11

Introduction

With these verses Peter closes off the middle section of his letter. He has exhorted them in many ways to “abstain from fleshly lusts..., having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles” (2:11-12). Now, he reminds them that “the end of all things is at hand” and exhorts them to hold fast in the Christian way of living, particularly among other Christians.

The End of All Things – v. 7

Peter reminds his readers of the impending end of Temple Judaism. Recall that Jesus had prophesied of the destruction of the temple within the lifetime of the generation He spoke to (Matt. 24). Peter, writing in the mid-60s (just a few years before the fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy in AD 70), exhorts his readers to be level-headed and steady in their prayers. An intensified persecution is coming (see 4:12), but the vindication of these early Christians is also just around the corner.

While Peter is writing in a particular context, the pastoral principal here extends to us. In the face of trials, current or coming, the temptation is to be anxious and worried and fretful and turn to all sorts of helps or fixes first. Peter says, though, that when things come to a head, hold fast, be steady, and pray.

Fervent Love – v. 8

The greatest commandments are to love the Lord with everything we are and have and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Peter reminds his readers of this by saying “above all things, have fervent love for one another.” Even in the midst of threatening persecutions, this is the way Christians should live. When things are tough, what is the natural reaction? We want to roll up like an armadillo or a pill bug. Instead, Peter calls Christians to love one another fervently, even in the face of trials and suffering.

Fervent love is strenuous and intense, not hyper-feely. This love is directed to your brothers and sisters in Christ. This love is not dependent on your circumstances. This love towards one another covers a multitude of sins, which is a key element in the life of the church because we all commit multitudes of sins. What happens when you put a bunch of sinners next to each other? Because God’s love for us, manifested through His Son, covers all our sins, we can imitate His love and cover the sins of our brothers (1 John 4:9-11). We are not to be exacting of one another, like the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:21-35). In Proverbs, this image is contrasted with stirring up strife (Prov. 10:12). Note also that this does not necessitate that there is no confrontation over error (James 5:19-20). Our temptation so often is to not cover sin with love in any way. Either, we do not confront with love, and so we stew in our bitterness and resentment. Or, we do confront without love, not seeking to cover and deal with the sin, but actually trying to stir up strife.

Hospitality – v. 9

As an outworking of this fervent love, Christians are to be hospitable to one another without grumbling. One specific application of this in Peter’s day would have been to house or host travelling fellow Christians, such as those on the road teaching and preaching or those fleeing persecution. The verb form of the word for “fervent” in the previous verse is often translated “stretch out,” as in “he stretched out his hand.” Hospitality is perhaps a clear image of this sort of love, welcoming people into your home with outstretched arms.

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As with the exhortation to love, Peter here is speaking primarily of the relationship among Christians. Using your home for what we might call evangelistic hospitality is wonderful, but in this instance you are exhorted to be hospitable to one another without grumbling. Hospitality is often daunting because of time, the state of your home, cost, or simply awkwardness. But hospitality is at its core loving your brothers and sisters in Christ through the home and the situation and the family that God has given to you, whatever that may be. When it is done in love and without grumbling, even the most meager meal is a blessing (Prov. 15:17).

In each of these exhortations, Peter points people away from themselves, even in their time of need. Why is this? He reminds them in the next verse.

Minister as Good Stewards – vs. 10-11

God has poured out His grace to His body by giving them various gifts (cf. Eph. 4:7-8), and Peter reminds Christians that they are to use these gifts to minister to one another. This is our calling as stewards of the manifold grace of God. Peter then gives two particular examples: preaching and serving. Those who speak (preaching and teaching) within the body of Christ are to be received as speaking (and evaluated according to) the words of God. Those who minister (think first of the deacons, but then also anyone who serves) should do so to the utmost of their ability, which is given by God.

God calls you to minister to your brothers and sisters in Christ wherever you are with the particular gifts He has given to you. God has given you gifts, and He expects a good return on it (Matt. 25:15-30). This is the reason why Peter can exhort Christians in times of hardship to turn away from themselves. You have been given much. So do not grumble, but be pleased at the opportunity to turn around and give it away.

Conclusion

Our prayer, our love for one another, our hospitality, our service should not be founded on how we feel at the time. All of these things flow out of remembering and recognizing what God has done for us. So often, we forget that our heavenly Father loves us. He does not love us because we are good people. And He does not love you just as you are with the hope that you stay that way. But He does love you where you are and promises to do a work in you to transform you into the image of His Son. He calls you now to work out what He is working in you through His Spirit. He has given you life, talents, and abilities. He has given you homes to open, tables to share, and hands to serve.

We love Him because He first loved us and sent His only Son to die for us. And if you love Him, you love the people in His church (1 John 4:20-21), starting with the people sitting next to you in this building. Your love for one another flows out of who you are in Christ. You have been given to to give. The principle that Jesus gave to His disciples as He sent them out was, "Freely you have received, freely give." And so, Trinity Church, as you already do, get to work.