

“LIVING FOR OTHERS”

I. INTRODUCTION

In last week’s passage, Peter gave us a negative description of the Christian life, showing us what we must not do. Today’s passage gives a positive description of the Christian life, showing us what we ought to do, how we should live. And, as we would expect, these instructions stand in sharp contrast to the prohibitions listed in the preceding passage. We are not to be given to sensuality and drunkenness, but to be self-controlled and sober-minded. We are not to view other people as mere objects to bring us pleasure, but as those to whom we owe our love and service. In this passage we are given a concise summary of what the Christian life should look like, of what your Christian life should look like. This is how the Lord wants you and I to live.

II. THE END OF ALL THINGS IS AT HAND

The passage begins by giving us a reason why we need to be very careful about how we live. We need to be careful because “The end of all things is at hand.” The end of the world, the final judgment, is just around the corner. That is what Peter says. But how can this be true? How can the end be near when 2,000 years have passed since Peter wrote this? But it is not just Peter who said this sort of thing. We find it all throughout

the NT. 1 Corinthians 10:11 says that “the end of the ages has come” upon us. Galatians 6:15 refers to the church as “a new creation.” Hebrews 1:2 says that God has spoken to us through Jesus “in these last days.” 1 John 2:18 says that “it is the last hour.” It is the clear teaching of the NT that the end times have already begun, that they have been inaugurated. The life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ has ushered in the last stage of human history. Now, it is also true that the NT says that the end times have yet to reach their final stage, but it clearly tells us that they have begun. The stage has been set, and the day of the Lord will come like a thief.

It is a constant struggle for us to keep this in mind. We may say that we believe it, but do we really live in light of it? How would your life change if you knew for certain that Jesus was going to return on this day next year? How would you spend this next year of your life? What would you do differently? That is the point that Peter is making in this text. He is urging us to conduct our lives in such a manner that we are always ready for the Lord’s return. The world around us is trying to lull us to sleep, trying to intoxicate us with its distractions, worries, and pleasures. Do not let the world do this to you! Be sober-minded. Be self-controlled. You have been set free from the things that this world loves.

One of the qualities of a sober-minded life is that it is a life of prayer. Prayer weans us from earthly-mindedness and it cultivates heavenly-mindedness within us. This is why

one of the best ways to evaluate your spiritual life is to take a look at your prayer life. How often do you pray? How long do you pray? What kind of things do you pray about? We neglect prayer to our great peril. Earthly-mindedness causes us to neglect prayer, and then prayerlessness further establishes us in our earthly-mindedness. When we neglect prayer, we cut ourselves off from our source of spiritual strength. Do not think that you can live a faithful Christian life in your own strength. Do not think that you can live off of past supplies of God's grace. That is like trying to live today off of the food that you ate last week, last month, or last year. We all need strength from the Lord each and every day. We need to go to him in prayer every day of our lives.

III. KEEP LOVING ONE ANOTHER

The next thing that Peter says about how God wants us to live is that we should keep on "loving one another earnestly." Love is the fundamental character trait of a Christian. We see this all throughout the pages of Scripture. Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:12) Paul wrote, "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." (Romans 13:8) John wrote, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." (1 John 4:7-8) Love is to be the distinguishing characteristic of every single Christian. The Christian life is a life

patterned after that of Jesus, and Jesus lived the perfect life of love. By looking at his life, we see that the Christian life is a life lived for others.

One of the key traits of love is that it covers over a multitude of sins. Love causes us to overlook the offenses that others commit against us. Of course, there are times when sin needs to be confronted, and the Bible certainly had something to say about that. But the Scriptures also tell us that it is good to be able to look over offenses, to forgive them without even taking offense in the first place. We saw this in our OT reading from Proverbs 10:12, and we see it in several other Proverbs as well. Proverbs 17:9 says, “Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.” And Proverbs 19:11 says, “Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.” The reason why love covers over sins is because it is not chiefly concerned with preserving its own rights. Instead, love concerns itself with the honor and well-being of others.

As we think about what it means for us to love others by covering their sins, it is good to be reminded that we all stand in need of this kind of love. We need others to overlook the ways in which we offend them. Listen to this observation from C.S. Lewis, in his classic book *The Four Loves*: “In reality we all need at times, some of us at most times, that Charity from others which...loves the unlovable...There is something in each of us that cannot naturally be loved.” (pgs. 181, 183) We would do well to keep that thought before

us at all times. Do we realize how difficult it sometimes is for others to love us? And more importantly, do we have any idea of just how unlovable we are in the sight of a holy God? If God has loved us, then we ought to extend the same kind of love to those who offend us.

IV. SHOW HOSPITALITY WITHOUT GRUMBLING

The next quality commended in this passage is that of hospitality. Instead of seeing our homes as our own private refuges, the Lord wants us to use them for the sake of other people. Now, this does not mean that every Christian has to throw lavish dinner parties on a regular basis. Everyone's situation is unique, and each person's expression of hospitality will differ, depending on their circumstances. The point that Peter is making is that we should all strive to use our homes, our possessions, and our abilities, not just for ourselves, but to refresh and serve other people.

And this hospitality should be extended without grumbling. I think we all know why Peter added that qualification. Have you ever had a guest who overstayed his or her welcome? Have you ever felt that someone was imposing upon your good graces? What do you do when that happens? Most of us grumble, don't we? Oh, we may still offer our home or our service to them, but in our heart we wish that they would just go away or leave us alone. And we sometimes even let them get a sense of how we feel, hoping that

they will feel guilty for putting us out. That is the kind of hospitality that we offer in our flesh. But the Lord calls us to a different kind of hospitality. He loves a cheerful giver, not a grumbling one.

V. USE YOUR GIFTS TO SERVE OTHERS

One of the ways that we can guard against grumbling is to remember that everything that we have to offer in service to others is not really ours to begin with. Everything that we have is a gift from God. How can anyone impose upon us when our homes, our food, our possessions, and our very lives are not really ours to begin with? That is what Peter is saying here. He says that God distributes gifts throughout the body of Christ, gifts to every member. And these gifts are not primarily given for our own happiness or our own sense of fulfillment, but they are to be used in service to others.

If you are a Christian, then God has entrusted you with a gift, or gifts, to be used to serve to your fellow believers. What gifts has the Lord given to you? In what ways can you serve others in the body of Christ? What needs do you see in this body of believers that you may be able to meet? Is there someone to whom you can lend a listening ear? Is there someone to whom you can speak biblical words of encouragement? Is there a lonely person that you can visit? Is there someone you can pray for? Is there some kind

of help that you can provide to someone who needs it? How can you use what God has given you to serve others? Those are the kinds of questions that this passage should prompt us to ask of ourselves.

Peter gives two categories of gifts: speaking and service. The first refers to those called to serve in the church's teaching ministry. The one who speaks is to do so as one speaking oracles of God. That is the task given to the church's preachers: to proclaim what God has said in his Word - nothing more, nothing less. This is why Paul says in Ephesians 4 that the church's preachers are gifts given to the church by God for the sake of its edification. Listen to what Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of the greatest preachers of the 20th century, had to say about preaching:

“What is the chief end of preaching? I like to think it is this. It is to give men and women a sense of God and His presence...[T]his last year I have been ill, and so have had the opportunity, and the privilege, of listening to others, instead of preaching myself. As I have listened in physical weakness this is the thing I have looked for and longed for and desired. I can forgive a man for a bad sermon, I can forgive the preacher almost anything if he gives me a sense of God, if he gives me something for my soul, if he gives me the sense that, though he is inadequate himself, he is handling something which is very great and glorious, if he gives me some dim glimpse of the majesty and glory of God, the love of Christ

my Savior, and the magnificence of the Gospel. If he does that I am his debtor, and I am profoundly grateful to him.” (*Preaching and Preachers*, pp. 97-8)

Notice that it is not the power of the preacher that makes preaching powerful. The reason why preaching can give us a sense of God is because of what Peter says in this passage. A preacher is called to speak, not his own words, but the oracles of God. He is a steward of God’s Word.

But preaching is not the only kind of stewardship in the body of Christ. There are gifts of speech, and there are also gifts of service. And both are to be exercised in the same way: not in our own strength, not by our own cleverness, but in the strength that God provides. What Martyn Lloyd-Jones said about preaching is in one sense true of every spiritual gift. When any Christian uses the gifts that God has given him to serve others, and when he does so in reliance upon God’s strength, whenever that takes place, then we get a glimpse of God and his glory.

But this kind of service has to be done in God’s strength, because we have no strength in ourselves. We are like branches in a tree. We need to continually draw life-giving nourishment from Jesus Christ. As Samuel Rutherford wrote in one of his Letters:

“New washing, renewed application of purchased redemption, by that sacred blood that sealeth the free Covenant is a thing of daily and hourly use to a poor sinner. Till we be in heaven, our issue of blood shall not be quite dried up; and, therefore, we must resolve to apply peace to our souls from the new and living way; and Jesus, who cleanseth and cureth the leprous soul, lovely Jesus, must be our song on this side of heaven’s gates. And even when we have won the castle, then we must eternally sing, ‘Worthy, worthy is the Lamb, who hath saved us, and washed us in His own blood.’” (*Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, no. 233)

For, you see, we are all just vessels of clay. But by his grace, God has placed the treasure of the gospel within us. When you use your gifts, when you use your life, for the sake of others, and when you do this in God’s name and in God’s strength, then the treasure of the gospel truly shines forth, and God is glorified. That is a life worth living.