

Hope PCA Sermon: April 14, 2024

“Fervent Love” (1 Peter 4:7–11)

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All right, this morning continuing in 1 Peter 4, if you would please stand in honor of God’s Word as we hear it this morning. We’ll be looking at 1 Peter 4 verses 7 through 11. This is the very inerrant, infallible, living Word of our living God. Let us hear it and attend to it this morning. 1 Peter 4:7:

⁷ The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. ⁸ Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹ Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰ As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: ¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies — in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

You please be seated. Let me pray for us as we approach God’s very Word.

Lord, again we ask, that you would speak to us this morning through this your holy Word. Fulfill your own promise that when it goes out it does not return to you empty, but accomplishes all that you have planned and purposed for it. May it be successful. May we learn, may we grow, may we better understand you and your will for us and the beauty of the gift of Jesus Christ, our Savior. We ask it in his name, amen.

If you knew, if you knew without a doubt, that you had one day left to live — it’s halfway through today, so we’ll say tomorrow. Monday, tomorrow, is your last day on Earth. What would you do? How would you spend that last day? It’s a question that’s frequently asked in different contexts, different situations. It’s a question that can reveal our own priorities in life. What do we care about? What do we focus upon? How would you spend your last day on earth?

I did some poking around online to see how people might have responded to that question. On reddit.com (a place many of you might be familiar with, a place for different communities to discuss various topics) often there’s a Q&A format to this kind of thing. Someone actually has asked multiple times, I picked one, where the question was asked and people responded. Most responses were people saying, “I’d spend it with family. I’d spend it with friends. I’d call people. I’d talk to them. If necessary, I would ask for forgiveness. I just want to spend time and talk to the people closest to me.” There were more than a couple responses where the person said, “I’d go out for a really good meal.” A few also said, “You know, I think I’d go for a nice long drive. That old Sunday drive that maybe some of us remember.” Many, many nice sentiments like that. Connect with people I love, do things I care about that are important to

me. Quite honestly, some of them weren't nice at all. In fact, downright wicked" "I'd make sure all my money is spent. or indulge myself in certain lustful activities."

I found another site, never been there before, called joincake.com. I don't know what that is. Other than that, there was a writer who had an article on there. She was kind enough to offer us 12 suggestions. If you find yourself knowing that you have one day on earth, this young writer had 12 of her own suggestions. Three of them on ways to connect with family and friends. Again, wonderful sentiment. Another three for maybe engaging in a favorite hobby or interest one last time. Three of them for how to connect with nature. Go to the beach. I was reading that one and I thought, what if you don't live close to the beach? So the next one was go to the river. Go spend some time by the water or go out into the forest and enjoy nature. She ended with three ways to connect spiritually. Number 10 was interesting, the recommendation: take a hike up the top of the tallest mountain with your pastor. Look, I love Mount Rainier. I've wanted to hike to the top of that since I was a teenager. But I'm sorry, I'm going to need advance warning for that one, because that takes preparation. But the idea was connect with your pastor. Here's someone who's been your guide spiritually. Spend some time with that person, perhaps. Spend time in prayer or meditation. And then her last suggestion was maybe go to a convalescent home or a retirement home and just read scripture to people who are confined to those quarters.

Again, it's an interesting question. How would you spend your last day if you knew it was your last day on earth? There's a story told about Martin Luther, who, in response to this kind of discussion or question, said, "Well, if I knew tomorrow was the end of the world, I would plant an apple tree today." Another variation of that quote is, "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree." I've heard that quote many times, maybe you've heard it as well. It sounds so very like something Martin Luther would say. Optimism, hope in the face of pending disaster, defiant hope, defiant faith. It makes me think of the ways that he faced Satan when he heard Satan accusing him of sin. It just sounds like the good friar, the good brother Martin: plant a tree. There's a problem with the quote. The earliest known written record of it is from 1944, 400 years after the good pastor lived. But it's a great sentiment, isn't it? Plant a tree.

Again, what would you do? How would you spend your last day on earth? Well, I thought of this because I think that's exactly what Peter's addressing in this passage. He gives us an answer. Not so much specifics, necessarily, like the young writer, but broad parameters for the Christian life that would be appropriate for that hypothetical last day. In fact, as we'll see, I think appropriate for every single day. He tells us in verse 7 about a kind of mindset that we are to have as Christians, an attitude. Maybe we can call it the identifying character of a Christian there in verse 7. Verses 8 to the first part of verse 11, he gives us three instructions, exhortations for how to live: love one another earnestly, be hospitable, and serve others with the gifts God has given to you. And then the passage ends with a purpose for all of this, and a praise. Purpose and praise. So that God might be glorified, and then Peter does just that. He glorifies God. A doxology at the end of this passage. I want to work through those things in turn. Verse 7, verses 8 to 11, and then the very last part of 11 by itself.

So Peter begins this passage in verse 7 by saying, *"The end of all things is at hand."* Now we wrote this 2,000 years ago. The end of all things is at hand. What is the end of all things? Again, many with that little Greek word *telos*. That not only speaks of the end of something occurring, but often is used more broadly or more pointedly to talk about a goal or a purpose. And I think that's what Peter is doing here: he's pointing us to the culmination of what God is doing, the last stage, if you will, of God's plan and work of salvation. His redemptive plans, His redemptive purposes are coming to their fruition. This last stage being accomplished as the message of salvation in Jesus Christ goes out to the entire world, to all, again, of those elect whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, who are called and who are gathered in. He reminded us all the way back in chapter one, verse 20, about Jesus Christ, who himself was known "before the foundation of the world, but was made manifest" (was revealed, he says) "in these last times." That's what's going on in these last times. Jesus Christ is being revealed. So these last days are present. They're at hand, they're here. They were here for the church that Peter was writing to, they're here for us today. And what Peter's calling our attention to is to remember this and to live in that reality. We are in the last times.

Again, this is not new for Peter. We've seen this back in chapter 2 verse 12: *"Keep your conduct," he says, "among the Gentiles [among unbelievers] honorable, so that they may see those good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation [the day of Christ's return]."* He has the end in mind, and with that end in mind, he calls us to be and to live as a certain kind of people. The hope and expectations of Christians at all times have been that Christ would return, that Jesus could return at any time. We don't know when the last days will end. They're always on the precipice. We can look at the world around us and think, man, how could it get any worse? How could God possibly delay in sending Jesus? Well, they would have thought the same thing 500 years ago, 1,000 years ago, 1,500 years ago. We're always to be ready, expectant. How could it possibly last longer? He could come any minute. So yeah, it's been 2,000 years since Peter wrote this, but we remember that for God, 1,000 years is like a day, and a day is like 1,000 years. He is not slow to keep his promises. And if we see a delay in Christ coming, then Peter says in his second letter, chapter 3 verse 9, that in that delay we see God's patience, God's forbearance. So Peter's calling us to be ready, to be prepared.

Same thing that Jesus teaches in Mark 13: 33–37 about the master of a house who goes on a journey and the servants are to be ready and awake for his return because they don't know when he's coming back. Or his warning in the parable of the ten virgins: don't be like those five who ran out of oil in their lamps and had to go buy some and were missing when the bridegroom came. Be ready, be watchful for when the master, when the bridegroom returns. So the end is at hand, be ready, be watchful. And Peter tells us that this mindset, this character, and what that character of a watchful, ready believer looks like.

Three things there in verse seven. He says, therefore, because the end of all things is at hand, *"be self-controlled, be sober-minded,"* and this *"for the sake of your prayers"*. The first two, prepare, if you will, for the last.

What does it mean to be self-controlled? Well, it means don't be uncontrolled. Don't be frivolous. Don't be impulsive. Don't be reactionary. We live in times right now that glorify, that celebrate impulsive, self-indulgent behavior. Again, this phrase that people have come up

with, expressive individualism, is very appropriate. Express yourself. Be yourself. You be you. You only live once. Seize the day, blah, blah, blah, blah, and on and on. Rather than teaching self-control, we medicate lack of self-control. Now, I say that knowing and affirming that there are legitimate medical reasons for that to be done. But we live in a society that medicates everything now. That's the first answer to almost any difficulty or problem, physically or otherwise. Be self-controlled. Learn self-control.

The second thing, be sober-minded. Don't be irrational. Don't be unreasonable. Don't be foolishly impulsive in your thinking. These two ideas of being self-controlled and being sober-minded are therefore very much connected to one another: our minds, our actions. Again, Peter told us back in chapter 1 verse 13, *"Prepare your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope on the grace brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."* Prepare your minds to be ready for action, controlled, sober-minded. In these last days, this kind of attitude or character of a Christian is vitally important, and he's going to re-emphasize this again in chapter 5 verse 8. He says, *"be sober-minded and watchful."* Why? *"Because your adversary, the devil, prowls like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."* And that someone is you, and me, and any believer who too easily caves in to the impulses that our culture around us glorifies and encourages us to take advantage of. Peter's already told us: don't be like them. Put that away. That's the way you used to live, not anymore.

But also being self-controlled and sober-minded, he says, is beneficial to our prayers, to our prayer life. How often have we talked about prayer with someone and ourselves said it or heard them say, "Boy, I sure get distracted when I'm trying to pray." Doesn't that happen a lot? It's frustrating. Or another common experience: our minds wander. I've got these things that I'm going to pray for, and you start doing it, and then you start thinking about whatever. Or maybe we start falling asleep. Why do these things happen? Because we're not self-controlled. We're not sober-minded. So these things are, Peter says, *"for the sake of"*. That's a phrase interpreting, translating a small little word, but I think appropriately so. For the sake of our prayers. *"Be self-controlled, be sober-minded for the sake of your prayers."* It's a similar kind of advice that he gave to husbands back in chapter three verse seven: treat your wives properly for the sake of your prayers, he told husbands. So do we want our prayers to be effective? Our prayer life to be more robust and more consistent? He's calling upon us to learn to be self-controlled in our minds and in our bodies.

Again, this is so very, very counter-cultural, but it's the character of sojourners and exiles. Makes me think of James writing to the church, chapter one verse 19, to "be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger." That's just not the impulse of our society today. However we communicate, in person, but especially through secondary means (email, text, online types of interactions), boy, we are quick to respond. Someone said something and I need to respond to it. There's memes about that. We know it, we do it anyway. And often that kind of response is foolish. It's not the product of a sober-minded approach or of self-control, it's often better to just let it sit for a while. Maybe I need to walk away, do something else for 10 minutes, think about it again, and maybe it wasn't that big a deal. Maybe I don't need to respond. In fact, that's often the case. Be sober-minded, be self-controlled for the sake of your prayers, for the sake of your communication with the God of the universe.

This character, this mindset, if you will, of Christians, then leads to these three exhortations that Peter gives us in verses 8 to 11. They flow from one to the next. Three instructions on how to live a self-controlled, sober-minded, prayerful life.

First, he says, *"Above all"*. Above all — same phrase from Colossians 2 that we heard earlier this morning: above all, love. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, *"three things remain, faith, hope, love. The greatest is love."* *"Above all,"* Peter says, *"love one another."* *"Keep loving one another earnestly."* Be persistent. Keep at it. Be unflagging, untiring in your love for one another. And let that love be intense. Let it be deep. Let it be fervent. Again, this is mind and body stuff. Have a mindset or attitude that gives fruit to a fervent love that does not wane. that does not diminish, but is persistent and maintained in the ways that we think, the feelings that we have, the things that we do. This is, again, going to 1 Corinthians 13, what Paul is describing: fervent, persistent love, being patient even when I don't feel like it, being kind when I don't feel like it. Don't be envious. Don't boast. Don't be arrogant. Don't be rude. Don't insist on your own way. Don't be irritable. Don't be resentful. Do not rejoice in sin. Rather, rejoice in the truth. This kind of love doesn't keep a record of wrongs committed against it.

Again, we heard it in Colossians 2 earlier: forgive one another. In fact, the word used there was "must". We must forgive one another. This love *"bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."* It's an active love. Verbs are used in that passage. This is how love behaves. This is how love is persistent. This is how love is fervent. And similar ideas in Romans 12: *"Let love"*, says Paul, *"be genuine. Abhor, hate what is evil."* A lot of people tell us "Christians, don't be so hateful." Scripture tells us: hate what is evil. That takes wisdom, judgment, self-control. being sober-minded. Love what is genuine: *"Let your love be genuine. Hate what is evil; hold fast to the good. ... Outdo one another in showing honor". "Be fervent, [there's that word again] — be fervent and constant in spirit and in prayer."* Prayer again. *"Contribute to those in need ... show hospitality."* Peter picks up on that idea. *"Bless those who persecute you; do not curse them."* We've heard that from Peter. *"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Don't be haughty. [don't be proud], associate with the lowly. Don't be wise in your own sight. Don't repay evil for evil."* And he goes on and on in that chapter. the character, the mindset, the behavior, the love, the fervent, persistent love of Christians for one another.

So again, as always, the apostles really do agree with one another. Be persistent, fervently love. This is the calling, this is the lifestyle of the Christian. And Peter gives us a reason here. *"Keep loving one another earnestly"* [or fervently]. Why? Because *"love covers a multitude of sins."* Again, that idea from 1 Corinthians 13: love *"doesn't keep a record of wrongs."* Love forgives. Love forgives freely. Love doesn't wait for the other person to apologize. They should. Love forgives. "How often?" ask the disciples of Jesus. Seventy times, seven times. And he didn't mean that at number 491 you get to stop forgiving. He meant constantly, without fail. Love covers a multitude of sins. Sometimes the loving thing to do is to (when we're offended, when we're sinned against) is just walk away and let it go. That's love covering sin.

And why would we do that? Christian, why would we do that? What God did for us in Christ Jesus. He does not keep a record of our wrongs. He removes our sins from us as far as the east is from the west. He forgets them. He remembers them no more. God engages with us in

a kind of extravagant (or in the old use of the word prodigal, flamboyant even) forgiveness. A forgiveness that's free. We cannot pay a price for this forgiveness. There's no penance, there's no works to perform that give us this forgiveness. It's the free gift of God, received by faith alone. And it's extravagant. It's immeasurable. It's forgiveness for a lifetime of uncountable, innumerable sins, offenses against God and His holy character.

There's an old illustration from an evangelism, a program that would encourage people to think about their sins. Maybe you're a pretty good person and you only sin three times a day. Well, take that for a year, it's a thousand. Take that over a lifetime of 70 years: 70,000. And you know it's far more than three times a day. 70,000 offenses against God and His justice. You think we're guilty? We are guilty. And He freely forgives. All of it. extravagant, fervent, persistent love that God has for us should draw out the same from us for others. Because how petty are the sins of others against us compared to our sinning with a high hand against the Almighty Holy God. So the love that we show one another, at least in part, and Peter seems to be emphasizing this here, will be a forgiving love that covers a multitude of sins. Self-controlled, sober-minded, prayerful people can do this. Those who lack self-control, those who do not think sober-mindedly, sadly they will fail at this time and time again.

The second thing he encourages us to do. He doesn't use grammatically imperatives or commands, but it seems to be the habit of Peter to use participles as in place of commands and have the force of commands. So the second thing he calls upon us to do, verse 9: "*Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.*" Now, hospitality is often thought of as inviting people into our homes, having them over for dinner or some sort of fellowship, coffee, whatever. In fact, this is a thing that Rosaria Butterfield emphasizes in her book that "*The Gospel Comes With[out] a House Key*". I think a weakness of that book is that seems to be the only way that she envisions hospitality. There are other ways to show hospitality. Welcome a visitor who walks through those doors to come to worship with us. Bring something to share at the potluck. Sit with someone new at the potluck rather than the same group every week. We're creatures of habit. We all sit in the same place pretty much every week. It's natural. I would do the same thing if I was out there. We sit at the same tables for lunch. Sit somewhere else today. Sit with some different people. It's a way to show hospitality as we get to know one another and develop deeper bonds of love and friendship. Give generously to the church, help clean.

There are all sorts of ways we can show hospitality and a welcoming, generous attitude towards others. Jesus in Matthew 25 speaks of those who served him by inviting him in when he was a stranger. People say, "How do we do that?" When you did this "to the least of these my children, my people, you did it to me." Hospitality. Hebrews 13 verse 2 says very clearly, "*Show hospitality to strangers,*" and then this astonishing thing: "*for thereby some have entertained angels unaware.*" Be prepared. Be ready. The end of all things is at hand. Even angels may be part of our service to the Lord God. You don't know who you might be blessing or when. So we always need to be ready.

And then Peter adds this instruction or addendum to his instruction, do it "*without grumbling.*" It's so easy to grumble. It's so easy to get frustrated. You know, there's that 80/20 rule, right? 20% of the people do 80% of the work. I don't think that's true here at Hope, and

I'm thankful for that. But nevertheless, there's always a group of people who tend to do a great deal of the work. And I think when Peter encourages us not to grumble, there's ways we can help ourselves do that, and there's ways we can help our brothers and sisters not grumble. And that one way to do that is: don't be one of the 80%. Be part of the group who helps and does things. But for those who are part of the 20%, Peter says, keep yourself from grumbling. How do I do that? Again, self-control, sober-minded thinking, prayerful thinking. When I'm tempted to grumble, that's when I need to go to the Lord in prayer. And I need to be self-controlled and disciplined and sober-minded to remember to do that. So Peter's calling us to. These things aren't easy. but they are the call of our life as Christians.

And then in verses 10 and 11, he talks about serving one another. *"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace; whoever speaks as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves as one who serves by the strength that God supplies."*

"Be good stewards of God's varied grace." Again, a good steward is someone who is self-controlled and sober-minded. Recognize the gifts that God has given to you, whatever they might be: abilities, maybe financial or material resources, opportunities that you may have in one way or another. These are God's gifts and we are to be good stewards of them. One of the reasons I had to practice the piano as a kid growing up: God gave you a gift, you better use it for him. I said it in a way that's kind of unkind to my mom, but that was her message: be good stewards of the gifts that you've been given. Everyone can love and must love fervently. Everyone can show hospitality and should in whatever way, shape or form they can. But there are different kinds of gifts and different strengths of those gifts. But whatever that gift is, Peter's saying, use it to serve one another. That's being a good steward of whatever God has given to you, given to me.

In verse 11 he refers particularly to those who speak and to those who serve. By speaking he could mean just preaching and teaching. Certainly the idea that those are the oracles of God fits preaching and teaching. But think about the broader understanding of the Christian life. We all have the ability and the calling, even the responsibility, to speak God's truth to one another, to correct one another, to encourage one another, to give hope to one another, to bring a word of peace to those who need it. Again, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. These all are the fruit of God's Word and we may have the opportunity through prayer or encouragement or a word here or there to serve those around us who are in need. to the extent that they are the fruit of and reflect the truths and the content of God's Word. These also are the oracles of God.

Preaching is a sobering and in some ways a terrifying task, called to speak God's Word to God's people, a spokesman on his behalf. Have to be very careful. Well, the same is true in a similar way any time. we speak God's truth to others. Anytime we speak God's truth to others, we should be what Peter's telling us: self-controlled, sober-minded. It's all too easy to just click off those things we know to those who we think need to hear it. God's using you as his ambassador. Be his controlled, sober-minded ambassador. Speak carefully. and serve in *"the strength that God supplies."* We need that strength. We can't do it on our own. There's too much to do. There's too many needs. God has to supply the strength for us to serve in the ways that he's called us to and given the gifts to exercise.

There's an ultimate purpose in this that Peter points to as well. They're kind of in the middle of verse 11: *"in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ."* Peter has this grand, all-encompassing vision, I think, here in these verses. He's talking about the end of all things, in everything God to be glorified. Doesn't that last little bit remind you of a well-known question? Right? The catechism, the chief end of man, to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. The mindset, the character of believers, the fervent love, the hospitality, the service that flows from it, these things glorify God. If our chief end is to do that, then Peter has given us the tools for how to do that. Glorify God through Jesus Christ, he says. And I think at least in part what Peter means here is that our mindset, our behavior reflects what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

Think about it. God is patient and forbearing with sinners, not willing that any should perish. Instead, Paul tells us in Ephesians, "he loved us with a great love". He was rich in mercy toward us. His grace is immeasurable. He gives his very own Son to be our Savior. There's a persistent, fervent love from God, through Jesus Christ, to his people, given to us, that covers a multitude of sins. Because if I have sinned many times more than 70,000 times by the time my life comes to an end, multiply that by the millions, if not the billions, who have come to Christ Jesus in faith. The great weight of the number of sins for which Christ died.

But God is also hospitable. In Christ Jesus, he welcomes us into his presence Again from Ephesians, when "we were dead in our trespasses, God made us alive in Christ Jesus and raises us (has raised us already) into the heavenly places with Christ Jesus." Where Jesus is. And where is Jesus? At the right hand of the Father. I don't want to trivialize it, but there's a way in which Jesus is like the emcee at a party who announces arrivals of guests: "There's my child. There's my brother. There's my sister. Father, they're mine. Welcome them into your presence." The forerunner, the herald of Hebrews, that goes into the holy place of God behind the curtain and takes us there with him. God is hospitable to us. You can come into my presence. You can come to him boldly with your prayers like little children asking their craziest requests to their parents. With boldness we can approach God's throne of grace.

He speaks the oracles of his Word to us in Scripture. He graciously gives us gifts so that we can teach and preach his Word. He sends the Holy Spirit to give understanding of his Word and strength so that we can put it into practice. The God who "began a good work in us will complete it at the day of Christ Jesus." He is at work in us "to will and to do according to His good pleasure" — to want to do, in other words, and to be able to truly know what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. If we really recognize the depth, the extent, the depravity of our sins and the price that Jesus paid to deal with them once and for all, we should be a grateful people and a grateful people who want to be like Jesus. What would it be like? Oh, to have the fervent love for one another that Jesus has for us. To be as hospitable to one another as God in Christ Jesus is to us. To be as ready and willing to serve even sacrificially as Jesus did for us. Peter's not calling us to anything that Jesus hasn't done already for us. May God grant us His mercy and grace and pour out his Spirit upon us that we could be more like Jesus.

So again, back to that question: how does a Christian answer that hypothetical question about how to live that last day on earth? Well, hopefully the way that we try to live every single day,

self-controlled, sober-minded, prayerful, persistent and fervent in our love, showing hospitality, serving gratefully, because we know that this glorifies God, and that's our everyday, lifelong goal. And as we serve one another, we enjoy one another. As we enjoy one another, we enjoy Christ, for we are his body. And as we enjoy Christ, we enjoy God. Glorify God. Enjoy Him forever. So in the end, Peter's words here, though daunting, should not be burdensome, but rather welcome. This is welcome instruction for us. They should be words that resonate in our minds and in our hearts as beautiful, wonderful instruction and advice from our elder brother, the apostle. And so also should echo in our minds and hearts his closing words of praise. Let this be our closing thought this morning. To him, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Let me pray for us.

Lord God, we thank you for your extravagant love for us, your people, how you have shown that throughout history in dealing with your people, how you've shown it to us particularly and especially in Jesus Christ and all that he's done for us. Increase our love, increase our gratitude, help us to be mindful and controlled in our lives. Help us to pray, help us to love persistently and deeply and fervently because you first loved us. And may our lives bring you honor and glory. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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