

**WHO ARE WE: FERVENT LOVE
(SUNDAY, SEPT. 23, 2012)**

Reading: Leviticus 19:11-18; 1 Peter 4:7-11

Introduction

We continue in the series Who Are We and What Should That Mean? Today we consider the subject of love - the love we are to have for each other.

Who Are We?

We believe that God's Word commands that we are called to love each other fervently.

What should this look like?

As a local church we must not look like we are simply a club that meets once a week or so. Rather there should be very clear evidence of prayer for each other, fervent love, sacrifice, and service.

In the last sermon in this series we considered the subject of holiness. It is easy to be hypocritical in speaking of both holiness and love for each other. It is far easier to say this is what we believe than to actually fulfill what Scripture commands.

I have chosen 1 Peter 4:7-11, a passage that describes how we should love and live as a local church. There are four parts to this passage, that I believe are connected.

You are called to pray, to love, to sacrifice, and to serve.

1. PRAYER

1Pet. 4:7 But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers.

Five years ago, we considered briefly the background of 1 Peter. It was written likely between the years AD 62-64. The Jewish War which would result in the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem began in AD 66. Peter was writing this letter from Babylon – either a reference to Rome or to Jerusalem. Peter after more than 30 years of service to the Lord, after suffering much for the sake of Christ, after seeing amazing things, was moved by the Holy Spirit to write this letter to Christians spread over a large area in what we know today as the country of Turkey.

The destruction of Jerusalem, of course, brought untold suffering and pain to the Jewish people. Those who had listened to the words of Jesus in Matthew 24, were able of course to escape from much of this devastation. But this period was also very difficult for Christians throughout the Roman Empire. Though for a few years, Nero ruled with some measure of restraint, starting shortly after the writing of 1 Peter, Nero began his persecution of Christians in the Roman empire. As Jesus stated in Matthew 24:22, "And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened."

Peter had been a witness of all the events related to Christ's ministry. He had been given a position of great leadership. It was Peter who preached powerfully at the pouring out

of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Peter was also a witness to the great spread of the gospel among Jews first and then the Gentiles. It was the testimony of Paul that the gospel had gone into all the world and was bearing great fruit. And now after over 30 years of preaching and traveling, Peter could recognize the continued unfolding of redemptive history that included the judgment on Israel and Jerusalem in AD 70 and the troubles and testing God's people would face. I think this is the context behind verse 7.

The expression, the end of all things, could also be translated as the goal or the culmination of all things. I don't think Peter is simply talking about the end of the world. But rather he recognizes that in this time, **God is accomplishing events in redemptive history in preparation for the return of Christ, whenever that will be in God's perfect plan.** And this outworking of redemptive history was not something that these early Christians were watching from the comfort of their living rooms. They also were part of this great work and in the midst of the unfolding of God's great plan.

We obviously don't live in the same place in redemptive history as Peter's original readers, but I think we can honestly say there is more we have in common than we might expect. Every generation faces challenging circumstances but there are greater periods of trial. Imagine living in Europe through World War 1, the Spanish Influenza which came next, and then about 20 years later, World War 2, followed by the expansion of communism. Are we now in our own nation facing a similar time of extended testing and judgment? Many things would point to such. The threats that Christians now face in America are certainly increased in comparison to 40 years ago. The breakdown of western culture is accelerating. The Christians Peter was writing were themselves to pass through a time of judgment; some already were being so tested. I don't think it would be exaggerating to say that at least for our nation, we are facing a major point of crisis that directly relates to the well being of God's people and church in our nation. And I don't think this will change even if the upcoming election is not as bad as it could be.

Therefore because of the great importance of the time in which these believers lived, they are given the command in verse 7. **Therefore be serious and sober or watchful in your prayers** or even better, for the sake of your prayers. **This command is also for you.**

Peter is not commanding two separate things - to be serious and sober go together. The command to be **serious** means to be in a right mind. **Be reasonable, sensible, keep your head.** The second command is to be **watchful**, or to be sober. Peter uses this word three times in 1 Peter. We noted two weeks ago 1 Peter 1:13.

1 Peter 1:13 Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ;

1 Peter 5:8 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

The reason that you are called to be serious and sober is for the sake of your prayers. I think one of the great difficulties we have with prayer as 21st century Christians living in America is that we don't always realize the great spiritual battle that surrounds us.

We live in a strange world. Never perhaps have we been so isolated from the problems of others. Not that we are totally or blissfully unaware, but we are very isolated. We are at times overwhelmed with information, and yet we face the difficulty of knowing what to do with what we know.

Listen to the helpful comments of John Calvin on this verse.

It is, then, no wonder that the cares of this world overwhelm us, and make us drowsy, if the view of present things dazzles our eyes: for we promise, almost all of us, an eternity to ourselves in this world; at least, the end never comes to our mind. **But were the trumpet of Christ to sound in our ears, it would powerfully rouse us and not suffer us to lie torpid.**

But it may be objected and said, that a long series of ages has passed away since Peter wrote this, and yet that the end is not come. My reply to this is, that the time seems long to us, because we measure its length by the spaces of this fleeting life; but if we could understand the perpetuity of future life, many ages would appear to us like a moment, as Peter will also tell us in his second epistle. Besides, we must remember this principle, that from the time when Christ once appeared, there is nothing left for the faithful, but with suspended minds ever to look forward to his second coming.

The attitude here is of seriousness and awareness of what is going on so that one can pray and pray effectively. Think of a security guard called to watch over a valuable painting. Think of soldier on patrol in search of the enemy. We should be characterized as people who recognize what is taking place and are as a result frequently in prayer.

We don't live, of course, at the same point of redemptive history that Peter lived in. Nor is each challenge we face equally as important, but everyday is an important day in God's unfolding plan. Our present time is therefore vital as God unfolds His eternal and perfect plan.

Take time to consider what is going on so that you can pray more effectively and also act more effectively. You, of course, cannot deal with every situation. But if we obey this command, we can start to deal with the issues that not only we face but that others in this local body face and what other Christians face. Take time then to understand what is going on in obedience to this command.

Given the four verses which follow verse 7, prayer is one aspect of what verse 8 describes, fervent love. To be serious and sober for the sake of prayer must certainly include our prayers for each other. If we are sober and serious, then we can pray more effectively for each other. If we are sober and serious, we will also fulfill the other duties described in the following verses.

2. FERVENT LOVE, v. 8

1Pet. 4:8 And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins."

Peter uses a play on words in verses 7 and 8. **Since the end of all things is at hand, we must above all things** have fervent love for each other.

This the second time in 1 Peter where fervent love is mentioned.

1Pet. 1:22 Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently (ἀγαπησατε ἐκτενῶς) with a pure heart,

The French scholar, Spiq, wrote in his lexicon on the word **fervent** saying,

It would not seem that the accent falls on duration or persistence; it is rather fervor, authenticity, magnanimity, a certain lavishness of feeling that characterize Christian agape, eager and generous.¹

A fervent love will also be an enduring love. Love does not just happen. It must be maintained. It must be kept sincere, enduring, and fervent.

Peter gives an important reason for this command.

Love covers a multitude of sins.

This is likely a quote from Proverbs 10:12. For love covers a multitude of sins. What is meant by the word covers? How does love cover a multitude of sins? Listen to two passages also from Proverbs that help answer this question.

Prov. 10:12 Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all sins.

Prov. 17:9 He who covers a transgression seeks love, But he who repeats a matter separates friends.

To cover means therefore not simply to cover up a sin, but rather to properly deal with it. Instead of leading to further problems it seeks to properly deal with issues that come up. We read in Psalm 32:1, “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered.” Obviously we are not covering sin in the same way that God does. But we are to deal with sin in an appropriate way even as God does for us. We forgive as we are forgiven. We cover sin even as our sins have been covered.

Peter is not just giving a theoretical discourse on love. But rather an encouragement and a description of real love. When something is done against you, how do you respond? Do you respond with anger or with an attitude of properly dealing with the wrong that has been committed? And here we are reminded that love is able to cover not just one or two sins, but a multitude of sins. This is the nature of fervent or undying love.

What is the best way for Satan to attack a church? Often he will use not a direct approach, but rather an indirect approach. He will seek to weaken the real bonds of love that unite a local body. Love then is the defense of God’s people. It is more than just a sentiment or expression, but that which protects and guards us from internal and external attack. It keeps us from a multitude of other sins. **Above all things have fervent love for one another.**

¹ Spiq, *TLNT*, 460-461.

3. HOSPITALITY, v. 9

1Pet. 4:9 Be hospitable to one another without grumbling.

Hospitality in the first century was not simply having people over to your house for a meal. That no doubt was a part of hospitality, but even more hospitality meant opening your home for people to stay in, even for long periods of time when needed. During the first century world it would have meant housing families who had been driven from their homes by persecution. It also would have meant hosting missionaries and itinerant preachers who stayed not in the often morally questionable hotels of the day but in the homes of Christians. Hospitality also may have involved opening your home each day or at least each week for the church to gather for fellowship.

Both 1 Timothy and Titus describe hospitality as one of the qualifications for an elder in a local church. 1 Timothy also speaks of hospitality as being a qualification for a widow receiving support from the church.²

I think we can safely say that the gospel message would never have been advanced as it was in the first century without hospitality being faithfully practiced.

In 3 John 9, John writes about one who was causing problems among Christians because of his failure to practice true hospitality.

3John 9 I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us.

Clearly Peter is talking about a demonstration of love that is difficult and inconvenient. He is talking about true sacrifice for the sake of others and for the sake of the kingdom. **Generally speaking you don't grumble in having people over for dinner, assuming they haven't destroyed your house in their visit.** The common saying, attributed to Benjamin Franklin, is that "Guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days." Having a family stay in your home for three weeks or longer would be difficult. It definitely would be a temptation to grumble or murmur.

Now generally speaking, we don't encounter too many cases where we need to have people stay in our homes for an extended period. But there are acts of love and sacrifice that we are all responsible. We are not to love just in "word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth." And so this verse is a reminder and command that you are willing to be severely inconvenienced and to do it without complaint.

Peter's words here are reminiscent of the grumbling of God's people after the Exodus. And the story of the children of Israel and their complaining is far more serious than just a story about having good manners. To grumble or complain is to speak out against God. It is not just bad manners, but is serious rebellion.

Consider the duties that the Lord has given to you. What are you perhaps not doing that you should be doing? Often we escape grumbling simply by not even doing in the first place. **(Children and grumbling against what your parents ask.)** Let us all be willing to be seriously inconvenienced in our service to each other.

² IVP New Bible Dictionary, s.v. hospitality.

4. SERVING EACH OTHER, VV. 10-11

1Pet. 4:10 As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. **11** If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

There are three main points found in verse 10. **First**, every believer has received a spiritual gift. The word gift is the Greek word *charisma*, the basis of our words charisma and charismatic. Rightfully understood all Christians should be charismatics. Every believer has been given a gift or gifts by God.

1Cor. 12:4 There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit.

Second, the gift or gifts that you have been given are to be used to serve others. The word **serve** shares the root from which we get the word *deacon*.

I think there is a twofold reaction when we think of the subject of spiritual gifts. Some think, well, I don't think I have been given any spiritual gift. If I have, I have no idea what it might be. Others perhaps think, my spiritual gift is what gains me attention.

But how are spiritual gifts presented here by Peter? Peter's emphasis is on service. **Your gift is the means that God gives you to serve His church.**

Third, every believer is to serve as a good steward of God's multifaceted grace. God shows His grace in different ways, but we are to be united as good stewards.

The word steward is not commonly used today, except for maybe in the airline industry. The word steward in Greek is where we get our word economics. A steward was a person given money or property to manage. They were not the owners; rather they were responsible for the wise use of what they were given.

Whatever your gift might be, **you have a great responsibility as a steward to see that it is properly used.**

Further we note from verse 11, that there are **two general categories of gifts**. There are gifts of speaking and gifts of action or service. Both of these categories include a large number of possibilities. And it is not that believers only have one gift and not the other. As you mature and grow in your faith, I think it is reasonable to believe that God gives you gifts in both categories. You shouldn't limit your service then in saying I have only one gift when in reality the Lord may have given you more than just one gift or area of service.

Peter states that those who speak, must speak as the oracles of God. The expression "oracles of God" is not a common expression. Paul in Rom. 3:2, says that Jews had committed to them the oracles of God. So what does this mean? Those who have been

given the gift of speaking or teaching must use that gift with seriousness and thought so that his words match “the character of God’s words and purposes.”³

Those who serve, also have a great responsibility. They must serve with the strength that God supplies. They must serve not in the strength of approval of other people, but rather from the strength that comes from God.

The comments again of John Calvin are appropriate:

“Whatever part of the burden you bear in the Church, know that you can do nothing but what has been given time (or opportunity) by the Lord, and that you are nothing else but an instrument of God: take heed, then, not to abuse the grace of God by exalting yourself; be careful not to suppress the power of God, which puts forth and manifests itself in the ministry for the salvation of the brethren.”

Finally, we note the great doxology that concludes this section. Though God’s people faced an uncertain time of testing and trial, they were being called not simply to suffer but also to be victors. In verse 12, Peter reminds his readers that they should not be surprised at the fiery trial which comes upon them to test them. And yet in all things, we serve each other with the gifts that we have been given so that God may be glorified through the working of Jesus Christ. To God and to Christ belongs the glory and dominion forever. Amen!

This triumphal ending almost makes it sound like Peter is ending his letter. But the letter is not over. Rather Peter wants you to be encouraged that in serving each other we are part of that central working of God in all things. We may not have any tremendous stories yet like the great saints and martyrs of old. But when you use the gifts that you have been given you are a part of the same great working of God. And so especially now we must be serious and sober and so use the time of relative peace and the opportunities that we have been given. In fact, this text tells us to look for those opportunities to serve rather than simply think that they just drop out of the sky.

3. CONCLUSION

Not programs but prayer, love, sacrifice, and service.

Prayer - Please use the included prayer sheet for your personal and family times of prayer.

Love - Are there others in this congregation you do not have the right attitude towards? Love covers a multitude of sins. Let us seek to grow in fervent love for each other.

Hospitality/Sacrificial Help - What God commands is rarely easy, often not pleasant. But what God does command is never in vain when it is done sincerely.

Service - Consider again the gift or gifts you have been given. What are you doing in the life of this church with these gifts?

³ Paul Achtemeir, 300.

Can you see with these four categories the perfect fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ?

Prayer

Closing Hymn - 285

BENEDICTION - 1 COR. 15:50-21

But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.