

THIS WEEK WITH HIM...

As we have said before, God's heart for us is that we be well-armed for living well when surrounded by evil. It requires certain things from us, namely, intentionality in certain practices. His heart is that we not succumb to the evil that is IN us. The Holy Spirit used Peter, whom He had helped break free from so much, to counsel us about escaping evil's traps.

Work through these questions 1 Peter 4:7-11 raises.

(Kyle's sermon and Pastor Bob's commentary below will help you.)

1. The mission of Jesus requires serious and sound judgment of us. What comes to mind when you think of these two things? How are these developed?
2. When you are thinking right, what kind of prayers does the Spirit lead you into? What kinds of prayers do you pray when you are being driven by anxiety, self-centeredness, guilt and the like?
3. What are some signs in you that your love for people of our church is fervent, and what are some signs your love is lukewarm?
4. Who is someone you know that you could encourage right now by showing them hospitality?
5. Peter says God has given each of us a "gift." The Spirit uses our gift to grow the faith of others. What is the gift God has given you that helps others grow in faith? What can you do to sharpen that gift and to steward it well?

A HIGH-YIELDING, BONUS ACTIVITY

Because we easily develop preferences in our relationships with people we soon also develop prejudices against others. Both can be caused by bad experiences, fear, envy, our own insecurity, and our own idolatry. Preferences and prejudices can focus on ethnicity, personality, body type, age, dress, cool, occupation, socio-economics, personal talents and abilities. The list could go on endlessly.

We have become quite defensive about prejudice in the modern era. We act as if we not only don't have this sin, but as if we never have. We harshly shame any caught in it. This is a wild hypocrisy that puts us on dangerous ground. Remember, we prove daily we are capable of listening to our own self-serving thoughts rather than those of the Holy Spirit. The moment we do so, we stray into the stronghold of preferences and prejudices. So prejudice is well-within our capabilities and takes root in each of us.

This observation is not meant to normalize prejudice, to excuse it as "only human." It is to clearly declare it to be sin, to be repented of the moment we feel it in our hearts. It is to arm us against a game being played in our culture that will destroy us. We have normalized sins of all sorts. They are sins we want to freely do. We have even proudly embraced them. When we do that it should not surprise us that some have chosen to embrace this particular sin and all the injustices that go with it.

Rooting out the sins of preference and prejudice requires our greatest vigilance! So it is really good to visit three passages of Scripture regularly to confess and cleanse our hearts from them. Do that this week. Visit Galatians 5:13-24. It identifies the thoughts that spring up in us from "the flesh." Our "flesh" is our thinking that we slip into when we are not controlled by the Holy Spirit. It is self-centered, self-serving and ugly in every way. Then these verses talk about the thinking that is of the Spirit. You need these verses to tell the difference in your own mind. Visit James 2:1-13. It deals with the injustice that flare up in us of favoring certain people and marginalizing others. Then visit Matthew 5:17-48. It speaks of our tendency to not look deep enough for particular sins, to look only at our outward actions and not at our hearts. You will catch yourself pleading guilty to many sins when you become more aware of where your heart drifts. You will gain freedom as you meditate on these truths.

1 PETER COMMENTARY

4:7—"the end of all things is at hand; therefore be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer."

The Scriptures were written by a single divine author and a number of human ones. In His inspiration of the text of Scripture God did not violate the style or the understanding of the human authors. They articulated what they knew and their account harmonized with their personal understanding of life, the world, and creation. There are times their language accommodates later discovery, but for the most part they spoke about what they had come to understand and did so in a way that God superintended so that His exact thought for man was revealed through the language and style of the human writer.

When Peter says that “the end of all things is at hand,” we see in his words the understanding that every New Testament author had. Their understanding was that there was no event or events prophesied in Scripture that needed to be fulfilled before the projected events of the last times burst upon us. The writers did embrace this idea of immanency. We can argue about what exact event they expected next, but they had no apparent doubt that the events associated with the end of earthly government and authority could unfold at any moment.

Peter’s belief in this regard is clearly expressed here. In the verses that follow he seemed to be expecting a time of judgment and separation (verse 17), to be a part of this “end.” For this reason he exhorts his readers to a certain mentality characterized by sound judgment and “sobriety.” The word “spirit” has been added in the NASB, but sobriety is a concept common to both Paul and Peter. The word itself meant “without wine,” but came to refer to a mindset that was unimpaired by anything, whether substances, false ideas, material excess, or whatever. He also exhorts them to a certain activity, that of prayer, or what we might call prayerfulness. He was in this calling them to seek the Lord’s mind in every action and reaction and to understand His will in the budgeting of the passing moments.

Our lives should be purposeful, focused by His leading on the matters that relate to His kingdom. The condition of our own processes impacts the effectiveness of our prayers, and we must not expect that casual, half-hearted prayer out of an uninvolved, undisciplined, or inactive mind will bring about spiritual results.

4:8—“Above all, keep fervent in you love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.”

The phrase “above all” is a significant one that indicates something important that could escape our best attention and effort. It also indicates something of great import to the mission which if left undone could have high impact.

Peter had heard from Jesus the importance of love. Jesus had said that by demonstrating love for one another all men would know they were His disciples (John 13:35). Love is to be kept fervent. It is to be real and obvious. We must resolve those things that destroy love or that dampen its fervor. We must focus on the value of individuals to God. We must understand their pain because in understanding their pain we will to a greater degree understand and look past their idiosyncrasies and even their sins.

By commanding us to keep fervent in love Peter is reminding us that we must check ourselves in this matter. It is easy and natural to stop loving. By telling us to do this “above all” he is reminding us that something too precious to lose is at stake to let love become anything less than fervent.

The ability to weep with others and to rejoice with others must be cultivated, along with all the other “one-another’s” that are commanded in Scripture. These “one-another’s” also must be scheduled in our busy lives. Loving fervently takes time whether time with God, time in prayer for others, or time spent working for and serving others. Love must appear on our schedules or I suspect that it is not fervent.

Peter gives the reason why this fervency must be stirred and fueled. It is because love covers over a multitude of sins. By this he means two things. First of all, knowing that churches and church people are all in process and so are full of imperfections, he was thinking of something we could do to give credibility to our message. Love for one another was Jesus' solution and strategy in this matter. Love demonstrated by Church people for one another covers over their multiple imperfections that would otherwise rob their message of credibility. When others see love demonstrated they overlook other imperfections.

Second, love demonstrated toward each other helps us within the church overlook one another's imperfections. So love intentionally practiced causes a kind of natural love to grow among people. When we are the objects of love, we tend to overlook the shortcomings of those loving us and we develop a reluctance to focus on them. In fact, very often we cannot be led to do so even when we need to!

Peter knew that we could be insulated against the influence of the evil one who works overtime to destroy unity by intentionally practicing love for each other. So keeping love fervent becomes the critical church activity, the "above all" else focus when we think strategically and more important biblically, about advancing the mission of making disciples of all people.

4:9—"Be hospitable to one another without complaint."

The Lord will orchestrate genuine caring in His church that will cause each Christian to share all that he has been blessed with. This was particularly important in Peter's day when travel was slow and lodging a challenge. But I suspect that this command had more to do with cultivating church life and ministry than with meals and lodging.

There is no better means of encouraging someone than to have them in your home, to share what is yours with them, and to minister to their needs instead of your own. We are to do this and it is the great scourge of American middleclass life that we are becoming too busy to share our lives at this level with each other. The one who will take time to open their home to other believers will in carrying that out with joy, have great ministry.

Peter says to do this to one another. It is believers who are known to us that he is concerned about and wants us to focus on. He is not asking us here to open our homes to strangers, though we are encouraged to do that elsewhere in Scripture (Hebrews 13:2, 3 John 5). Our love for each other is not fervent (verse 8), if we are not hospitable to each other.

He says we are to do this without complaint. This indicates that our hospitality is to extend beyond our circle of close friends and is to be in some way sacrificial. We are inclined to complain when we do something that stretches us in some way, and so it must be that Peter had in mind situations that might not be most desirable to us. Things like extended stays, financial impact, different forms of inconvenience, inability of someone to reciprocate, all these tend to make us complain and withdraw hospitality. We do so to our own harm and the harm of the Church. We must realize that simple hospitality provided some great moments in the lives of people in Scripture (Genesis 18:1-22, 2 Kings 4:8-17, Acts 10, Luke 10:38-42). It is a small thing with potentially huge impact, and it is something that every person can do in some way.

4:10—“As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

From speaking of something all Christians can and should do, Peter moves into speaking of the particular, specific and unique contribution each individual makes for the good of the whole. This is a result of God’s design. He has meticulously engineered the Church and each person in it so that they fit in a very practical and specific way into its overall function.

The outcome of this design is that He has given to each person a special gift. A gift is a way of thinking and so a way of responding to others and serving them. It equips each individual to be consistently used of God in a specific way to strengthen others. Each person then, has a primary spiritual gift.

Seven of these gifts are listed in Romans 12:6-8. They are prophesy, service, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, and showing mercy. Each person in the body of Christ is designed so that they think, act, and respond in a way that is characterized by one of these terms. This is their gift and their ability to function in this way makes them a gift to the Church. Our individual giftedness is one aspect of how the Holy Spirit manifests Himself through us (1 Corinthians 12:4).

A second aspect is the specific ministry the Holy Spirit generally summons us to use our gift in (1 Corinthians 12:5). People with the same gift will be called by Him to a different kind of ministry, and this diversity in calling adds to our uniqueness and helps the Church overall have a wider impact.

A third aspect of the Holy Spirit’s manifestation through us to others is our “energizing” (1 Cor. 12:6), the scope of our ministry. Different Christians are energized in different ways, some for broad impact across continents, some for more narrow impact. But all are to have some degree of impact through the Spirit’s work in them. All can increase that impact by being faithful.

Faithfulness in employing one’s giftedness is Peter’s main point here. He does not spend time developing the subject of spiritual gifts. The primary thing each person is to do is to faithfully serve other Christians through their gift. Now there is a gift of service, but that is not what Peter is talking about here. Here he says that we should employ our gift, whatever it is, in a way that serves others. By this he means that we are to strengthen them in what was referred to as “the way (Acts 9:2, 19:23, 22:4, 24:14, 22). It was a way of living that deferred always to the promptings of God, who had joined Himself to every believer through the Holy Spirit.

All that we are, God has by His grace given us for this purpose, serving for the good of others. He has blest us so that we can have a part in the noble and great work of transformation He is doing. We can in this way taste the past, what Adam enjoyed before the fall, and the future, what we will enjoy to the fullest degree in eternity.

This use of our giftedness to serve others is a matter of stewardship. It is a responsibility for which we will be held accountable. Most use these inherent assets to serve their own interests. We must be different. We must realize that we have these things because of God. They are His and have been entrusted to us. We must manage them in a way that He and His interests benefit. Our challenge is to behave as managers, not owners. We do so when we employ our being as He has made us to help others live the same way we live. We are poor stewards when we leave our gift, or any of the things God has entrusted us with, undeveloped and unused (Matthew 25:24-30).

Whenever the subject of spiritual gifts is mentioned in Scripture, two concepts appear with it. One of these is the idea of diversity. Peter's words express this here through the word rendered "manifold." There are many "looks" to giftedness and ministry. A second concept that always is mentioned with gifts and giftedness is grace. Our value and impact is by Yahweh's favors. It is not a result of our own inherent power of goodness. So this verse commands us to serve others through our giftedness, whatever might be our gift. The next verse will tell us how to make sure such service is carried out through our giftedness.

4:11—"Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

No matter what the gift, it involves speaking and serving. Whether the person is showing mercy or leading, to do as Christ does they must both speak and serve. Rather than understanding this verse in isolation from the context it is best to see it as connected to what Peter has just said about each person having a gift.

Some have seen this verse as referring to two categories of gifts, speaking and serving gifts. They suggest that the various gifts listed in Scripture can be divided into these two categories. This works to some degree but it is hard to imagine any of the gifts not involving serving, especially in light of what Peter has just commanded. He has said that we are to employ our gift, whatever it is, in serving one another. It is equally hard to imagine strengthening others through our gift apart from communicating with them.

Peter is exhorting us to carry out our giftedness with the Spirit's words and actions. Let our words of instruction, mercy, service, or whatever, be orchestrated by God. Don't just talk and converse. Seek to utter God's word for the moment. He always has some message for the moment (Mark 9:50, Ephesians 4:29, Colossians 4:6), that when spoken will communicate the right thing in the right way. Pursue this so that your tongue serves Him. If your tongue does so, the rest of you will tend to follow (James 3:1-5).

The second thing to remember in employing your giftedness is to do it with the strength God supplies. Some of the greatest opportunities come our way when we feel like we have nothing to give, like Jesus when He sat down to rest at Jacob's well in Sychar (John 4). We must discover for ourselves the mystery He spoke of in the wake of that experience when He said to His disciples, "I have food to eat that you do not know about . . . my food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to accomplish His work." (John 4:32, 34). There is a way to be strengthened by ministry as we pour ourselves out doing it, and we must discover that "food" which the apostles eventually discovered.

There is a time for rest. Jesus modeled that as well. But He often found strength to give more in moments when He felt like He needed rest. We must carry out our giftedness in the strength that God supplies, not the strength of the flesh. Too many cross over into the flesh when they employ their giftedness.

We employ our bodies and our minds in ministry, and it takes a great deal out of us. So it is not that if we do ministry right it will be effortless. It is not that in these bodies ministry can be done endlessly. Yahweh brought about great victories in Israel, but it required the very lives of some who fought in them. There is a similarity in ministry under the New Covenant. Our giftedness is a part of the fabric of our souls. When we use it we pour out physical and emotional energy (1 Thessalonians 2:8). But part of the fabric of our being is also the Holy Spirit, and it is to be more than our strength that energizes us. It will involve all of us, but it will be more than us and will accomplish more than our own strength could possibly permit (2 Corinthians 1:8-11, Colossians 1:28-29). The result will be that we will move beyond our work and accomplish His work. As we do, others will see and acknowledge His work and He will receive glory.

The key to God receiving glory is not for us to utter some phrase. That can become nothing more than a well-intended, noble but feeble human attempt at diverting attention from us to Him. Peter's strategy for God receiving glory in our efforts is for us to speak God's words and carry out deeds that clearly require His power. When we focus on that, God is glorified in all that we have done. When people hear His words and feel His touch, that is exactly what they say they have heard and felt.

There are times we must verbally divert praise from ourselves to God (Acts 14:11-18), because of the tendency of worshipping creatures to fixate on objects and people through whom they have experienced God. But the real key in this matter is to do God's work, God's way with God's words.

Peter ends this verse with a great statement on the glory of God. We could conclude that with these words he intended to close his letter, particularly because of the "Amen," which we associate with an ending. But it is just as possible that he felt that "Amen," meaning "so be it!" was the only fitting thing to say following his statement that all glory and dominion forever and ever belong to Christ. That this would be true in our personal lives and in our churches would be the greatest of milestones to achieve. It is the grand purpose of all that God has done and the great end to which His plan is working (Psalms 46:10, Isaiah 45:4-5, 20-25, Habbakuk 2:13-14, 1 Corinthians 15:28, Ephesians 3:10).

This is the purpose for everything Yahweh has intentionally initiated and all that He has permitted and allowed. It is a testimony to His great power that even evil can be made to serve Him in the end. This is the great truth that all creation should embrace that would inspire hope in the darkest of moments. All of creation and creation's events will be made to serve Him and will in the end demonstrate His great glory. One cannot ponder that thought long without imagining the moment it is realized and longing for it. "So be it!" That is the cry of creation's heart (Romans 8:18-23).