

First Peter No. 22 “The Cardinal Virtues”

1 Peter 4:7-11

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Text Comment

- v.7 “The end of all things is at hand” – how are we to understand *that* when so many centuries have passed? It is a complex subject, which Peter himself addresses directly in his second letter (3:3-9). The NT makes clear in a number of places that there are things that must take place first before the Lord will come again. Prophecies such as the ones we find in the Book of Daniel which we considered not long ago make the same point. Jesus prepared his disciples for the possibility of a long delay before his return. But there is also frequent mention of the nearness of the end and of Christ's return. We will only say here that one purpose of that witness is to remind Christians to live in view of the coming end of history, which, for all anyone knows, is near; even as it actually is near when viewed in the larger perspective of time, as Peter will say in 2 Peter 3.
- v.8 “covers a multitude of sins” The statement here is a very close approximation to the text of Proverbs 10:12 indicating that its meaning here also is that love will cause a person to overlook and to forgive the sins that others commit, even the sins others commit against us.
- v.9 The command is general, but it is likely that Peter has first in mind the case of traveling Christians and Christian leaders and preachers. They would show up, perhaps unannounced, hence the warning about not grumbling over the inconvenience of having to put up strangers. There was a great deal of coming and going in those early years and, of course, there was not in that world the network of decent hotels and motels that we enjoy today. Such hospitality is also frequently mentioned in the materials of early Christianity, especially in connection with the movement of Christian workers throughout the church.

It is always a good exercise to stop and think about a passage that we read in Holy Scripture and ask ourselves why the biblical author said what he said. Why did he say *that* and not something else? In this particular case, all the more. After all, if you had just this many words, this short paragraph of five verses with which to describe how Christians live and what they do, what would you have said? If you had to reduce Christian ethics to just a few things, what things would you have chosen to mention? Biblical writers often give us such short descriptions of a Christian life and often do not say the same things, though it is interesting and important to see how often they say nearly the same thing. We noticed that last Lord's Day evening, in connection with Peter's negative description of the Christian life – what Christians are not to do – how much what he says in 4:3 is virtually identical to two passages in Paul's letters.

But here Peter gives us the positive: what Christians do or should do; what makes up true and authentic Christian behavior. In the middle ages they spoke of *the four cardinal virtues*: prudence, justice, hope, and temperance. Well, there is some of that here to be sure. Or they spoke of the *three theological virtues*: faith, hope, and love; and those three virtues certainly make their appearance here. But, still, Peter's own description – his description of the Christian life in a few words – is

highly interesting and important. What did the great apostle want Christians *to do*? What was for him the authentic Christian life? What mattered most to this man – a man, remember, who was taught the Christian life by the Lord Jesus himself, both by word and by an example that Peter had been privileged to observe for upwards of three years, and by the Holy Spirit himself who oversaw the writing of Peter’s canonical letter – what mattered most to him?

Well, Peter says that Christians should be sober-minded and self-controlled, that is, people who see life, their own and that of the world around them, in view of the coming judgment. That will lead them to prayer and will empower their prayer. They must, in particular, love the brothers and demonstrate that love in practical ways: *overlooking one another’s sins* (a very difficult thing, we know; something that takes grace in great quantities to do faithfully and constantly) and *cheerfully offering hospitality*. That too is difficult. Have you heard the Italian proverb: “A guest is like a fish; after three days he stinks!” Further, Christians should live attempting to *make the maximum use of the gifts* God has given them, which he gave them precisely that they might employ them in his service. And in that service, they should rely on the Lord’s grace and help to make their service fruitful in the lives of others. We want to accomplish something in one another’s lives, we want to make other’s lives better, happier, holier than now they are. In all things they are to seek the glory of God and of Jesus Christ their Savior. There, in a nutshell, is Peter’s description of a faithful Christian life. How do we match up? Well, let’s look again. If we look closer at this description of the Christian life certain general characteristics of true Christian living emerge. And these, taken together, reveal not only the real burden of Peter’s description but also the high challenge of it.

I. First, Peter says that the Christian life is an other-centered life.

He says that, of course, when he urges us to love one another. But, as well when he chooses hospitality – the use of our homes for the sake of others – as a particular instance of Christian charity. And this is also the burden of his remarks about the use of our gifts. It is “to serve one another” he says that we have been given these gifts. There is no surprise here, of course. Christ is our pattern and there never was a more “other-centered” life than the one he lived when he was in the world. He came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. He came that others might have life and have it abundantly. Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. It is no surprise that the Christian life is to be dominated by love for others.

It surprises no one familiar with the Bible to be reminded of the centrality of love in the Christian life. But let the Scripture speak for itself. Among other such teaching, the night of his betrayal, the Lord Jesus told his disciples: “A new commandment I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” [John 13:34-35] And so with Paul. He writes to the Corinthians, “Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels and have not love...I am nothing;” to the Colossians, “Above all these things put on love which binds [all the other virtues] in perfect unity;” to the Romans, “Let no debt remain unpaid, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law;” and to the Ephesians, “walk in love, as Christ also has loved you.”

And so, with John, who writes, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God, and knows God. He that does not love does not know God, for God is love.” [1 John 4:7-8] And so with the rest of Holy Scripture, from beginning to end. And now

comes Peter, “Above all keep loving one another earnestly” and “show hospitality” and “use your God-given gifts for the sake of others.”

Here is the Christian life *above all* Peter says – the giving of love to others; living for the love of others. *That is what you and I are to be all about!* What is the cause of much of the unhappiness in this world, the cause of the unhappiness of those who are not Christians and the cause of unhappiness for those who are? Is it not, in very many cases an insufficient measure of love? We were made for love. We were made to find our happiness and fulfillment in love. The happiest, the most serene, and the most complete people are invariably those who love the most. And the wonderful thing about love, the proof that it comes from God and is divine in its character, is that no one ever gets enough of it.

Henry Scougal, in his great work, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, makes the wonderful observation that if he had his choice of anything to make him really happy, he should choose to have his heart full of the greatest love, affection, and kindness toward all men in the world. You see, if you really loved others, you would share all of their happiness – inward gifts, outward blessings – and, for that reason, you would have to be the happiest person in the world, because everything that made anyone else happy would make you happy too! For love’s sake you would share their sorrows too, of course, but it would be a pure sorrow. Such is the purity and the goodness of love. That is why no one has ever been harmed by love or diminished by it.

Now it is one thing to nod our heads in agreement with Peter here. But, the trick is to take this to heart. Are you and I living for love? And how does one do that; how does one know that he or she is actually doing that? Well Peter points the way. Love reduces to certain kinds of behavior; it is expressed by those behaviors and cultivated by them. Forgiving others is paramount. We’re all sinners. We can’t be lovers of one another if we do not forgive them; *really forgive them*, forgive them as if they had never sinned, even sinned against us. Those who love like Christ loved are eager to cover a multitude of sins. They love the opportunity to treat others as is they had never done anything wrong to them. If you have and hold grudges, if you are keeping a record of wrongs – and we all do that to some degree – *to that extent we are not the people Peter describes here*. I don’t know how many times I have seen this over the years: a Christian man or woman who claims to have forgiven the sins of others *and so obviously has not*. No; not forgiveness for a moment, not with half a heart, not the kind of forgiveness that allows us to continue to accuse the person in our heart. Love forgives with a vengeance; absolutely and permanently. Is that us? Is that you? Do we love to forgive so completely? Are we champions of forgiveness? Do others see that in us; in how we speak of others and their sins? Such questions Peter is forcing upon us here! They are not hard questions to answer as questions of fact, however hard it may be for us to face those facts. And then there is hospitality, extending ourselves for others, opening heart and home to others.

In our day hospitality has become something less natural and more important at the same time. I’ve been reading some things recently that remind me of the degree to which loneliness is becoming a major social problem in the United States as it has already become a terrible social problem in Japan. Here is a short paragraph from a recent piece on the subject.

America is increasingly a lonely nation. The proportion of American adults who say they are lonely has increased from 20 percent to 40 percent since the 1980s. Roughly 43

million adults over the age of 45 are estimated to suffer from chronic loneliness. The unmarried and the uncommitted to community report higher rates of loneliness, with the causality likely being a two-way street. [He means that our lack of community causes our loneliness, and our loneliness interferes with our becoming part of a community.] Prosperity has afforded our independence from neighbors and networks...but the relational and emotional collateral damage has fallen hardest on those least able to afford it. Put another way, an isolation of affluence is indelibly marking modern society.

Consider that just three decades ago, the typical American had a little over three close friends. Today, he or she barely has one confidant. Often someone's closest companion is staring at him in the mirror. It is surely no coincidence that the average household is growing smaller and older. In fact, over a quarter of Americans now live alone, up from 13 percent in 1960 and increasing especially after the Great Recession. [Aaron Renn, *The Masculinist*, No. 20]

And in another piece, we read this, the consideration of a particular case.

Modern loneliness is like nothing that has come before. "We identify with Carol not just because she is a person, but also because she is a modern person, without family, without faith, without community, identity or belonging. Like all modern people, she attempts to find solace from her losses in experience. She fulfills her dream of seeing Paris. She climbs to a high spot, looks out across the surrounding settlement and finds that something is missing. Rather than being overcome by the glory of the city, her mind rolls back to the last time she felt loved. We've all been there. The modern world is a machine and its output is millions upon millions of lonely Carols." [Cited in Renn]

In other words, there are people out there, loads of people, who need hospitality, who need the attention and fellowship that love supplies, who need to be cared for and looked after, who need to be affirmed. And they need to see the Christians they know offering that openheartedness toward others. To love is another way of saying "to be other-centered." *That is* the Christian life. Is it ours? That is the question. Put it to yourself: what other people am I serving in this way with my gifts, my ready forgiveness, and my home?

II. The second thing Peter says is that the Christian life is a life of faith; not of sight.

That may seem obvious, but Peter doesn't actually *say* that here. But what he says presupposes this at every turn. The life Peter describes here can only be lived believing certain things to be true and acting on that conviction. If a person doesn't actually think that the end of all things is near, he will not live the same way as he will if he is reckoning with the ultimate destiny of life. He will not find equal motivation to make sacrifices for others.

But there is more. The place of prayer in the Christian life – I suspect most Christians find prayer one of the supreme challenges of their Christian life – is also a matter of faith since prayer is supremely *an act of faith*. Here is conversation with someone you cannot see, cannot hear, whose answers you often cannot discern. Only faith will pray under these circumstances; only a conviction that what God has said in his Word is true and that the promises he has made to his children will

certainly be kept. But faith is also the presupposition of his remark in v. 10 about using the gifts God has given us and again in v. 11 doing so in the strength that God supplies. If one believes himself only to have a talent, he will not employ, she will not use that talent in the same way as someone who knows it to be God's gift to him or to her. Nor will they be conscious of their need for God's help to maximize the benefit of those gifts for the blessing of others.

We are not to live naturally, as if an unbeliever could do what we do just as well, or as if we could help others in our own strength. Faith is, as many have said, *the power of God at the disposal of man*. And that is how the Christian life alone can be lived by sinners, such as ourselves, sinners still as weak and selfish as we know ourselves to be. If we are not motivated by convictions we have based on things we cannot see, we're not going to live the life Peter has described here. We're not going to come close to living that life. We're not even going to aspire to live that life. We need help from another world as we make an effort to use what God has given us for the purpose for which he gave it.

Here too the problem is familiarity. There are many who will nod their approval to the ethics of the Christian life, many who profess to admire the life of love for others, but whose faith is so weak, or non-existent that they barely grasp what a radical way of life Peter is describing and how profoundly it depends on a living conviction of things unseen. *They like the fruit of the gospel, but not the root from which it springs* [Ryle, *Practical Religion*, 123-124]. Multitudes will praise love who have no interest in being told what love will do in the push and pull of daily life; how it must often and a great inconvenience involve itself in the life of others or how absolutely it depends on a Christian's confidence in the truth and the presence and the daily blessing of God.

This is a lesson that must be taught at home by Christian parents. Christian children must learn how to think and speak of others, perhaps especially others who have sinned in some way. They must see forgiveness and love in action, in the look on your face and the tone of your voice that communicates your love and forgiveness. Children should be taught to practice the same love toward their school mates, church friends, and neighbor children. And they must be taught to pray for the Lord's help to do so. Only the Lord can prove to us that nothing will satisfy us or please us more than loving others, perhaps especially loving others who have not loved us. Christian children must know what a high calling they have and what an adventure the Christian life is precisely because it goes so much against the grain and requires of us attitudes and actions that others have no taste for at all.

Lots of people praise love who never cover anybody's sins. Lots of people praise love who do not in any practical way use what they have been given for the sake of others. The problem is that they lack faith, and lacking faith, an active, working, praying faith, they lack both the wit and the power to love. And love requires a great deal of wit and a great deal of power, power that selfish sinners simply don't have, but which they can get from God who gives liberally to all who ask him. And that will be true for the most experienced believer as it is for the novice. As Rabbi Duncan put it: "Believers live not on the first act of their faith, but on the continual act of their faith; because it is not faith they live on but Christ. We can no more live by yesterday's faith, than we can see by yesterday's light, or have our life supported by yesterday's food." [NIV Bible, B25]

Not one of us here really knows what he or she could become if only he or she lived more and more

by faith, living by the promises of God, trusting his presence, power, and willingness to bless, seeking at every turn grace to help in time of need and looking for opportunities to love others this exceedingly important and practical way, to rejoice in the opportunity to cover a multitude of sins as if they had never been.

“Give me a passionate man, a hot-headed man, and one that is headstrong and unmanageable; and with faith as a grain of mustard seed, I will, by degrees make that man as quiet as a lamb. Then give me a covetous man, an avaricious man, a miserly man; and with a little faith working like leaven in his heart, I will yet make him a perfect spendthrift for the church of Christ and for the poor. Then give me one who is mortally afraid of pain; and one who all his days is in bondage through fear of death; and let the spirit of faith once enter and take its seat in his heart and his imagination, and he shall, in a short time, despise all your crosses and flames.... Then show me a man with an unclean heart and I will undertake, by his faith in Christ, to make him whiter than snow, till he will not know himself to be the same man.” [“A Latin Father” through Whyte, *Bunyan Characters*, iv, 109-110]

And I would add, give me a man who lives for himself rather than for others, give me a man who thinks about himself almost exclusively, give me a man who is quick to judge others and to look down on others and to condemn others and to hold a grudge against others, and by faith I will make him a man whose love for others is the dominating interest of his life. Peter never imagined that what he was asking you to do you could do by yourself without applying the truth of the Word of God to your life and without the strength and blessing only God can give you. You must walk with God truly to walk with others!

III. Third, and finally, Peter says here that the Christian life is heart-centered.

By that I mean this: the life Peter is describing in these few verses is and must be lived from the inside out, with the heart given to love and to God as much as the hand, the heart given to love as much as the words of one’s mouth. It is a life that is the same on the inside as on the outside. This is a consistent theme in the Bible, as you know. It was not and is not in other religions and philosophies of life. But the Bible always begins with two facts: 1) the first is that God looks into the heart and cares as much about what he sees there as about what he sees us do, he judges your life by the thoughts and intents and attitudes of your heart; and 2) action originates, the life originates in the heart. Long before Peter we find in Proverbs 4:23 this same fundamental perspective on life.

“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”

And, again in 21:2:

“Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart.”

Jesus said both of these things himself. You cannot *live* rightly if you don’t *think* rightly in your heart; if you are not committed to a holy life *in your heart!* Peter’s summons to us here is too high and too demanding to be answered faithfully unless it is supported by the inner conviction of the

heart, unless the heart is full of desire for this life and not for another. That is why, though we hear about love and hear it being sung every day all day, we see so little real love in the world, so little real sacrifice for others, so little real covering of sins, so little of people using what they have for the sake of others. It takes the assent, the conviction, the agreement, the devotion, the passion of the heart to do that; to live like that!

That is Peter's point, once again, several times here. You see it first in the matter of "covering sins" which, of course, practically amounts to a willingness to be offended, disadvantaged, even abused without making a return, without requiring vengeance, without demanding an accounting – whether an apology, or punishment, or a repayment of some kind. In other words, this love must be so rooted in the heart that the natural and powerful instincts of self-protection and vengeance are suppressed in the interests of Christ's love. This is the self-control and sober-mindedness" that he referred to in v. 7. This is not a life of your natural tendencies exercising control, of your allowing your emotional responses to what is happening around you to go unchecked. This is a devout heart demanding of yourself a response to events and a seizing of opportunities in keeping with your loyalty to Jesus Christ.

You have the same thing in that additional clause Peter adds to his command to offer hospitality, that clause that bears, as one commentator put it, "the sharp tang of realism": offer hospitality, he says, "without grumbling." It is one thing to live up to public expectations. It is another thing to do what God commands cheerfully, no matter who sees or takes note of what is done. That willingness comes from the heart alone. And with such a heart, the hospitality will be extended even to someone who arrives hard on the heels of someone else, to someone who broke your favorite dish the last time he was in your home, even to someone whose company is so deadly uninteresting that it is a monumental achievement just to keep a conversation going. For a devout heart sees Christ in that guest, sees loving him or her as an act of loving Christ, and doing good to him or her as a tiny installment on the debt it owes to Christ who, while we were yet sinners, died for us.

No wonder the Bible urges us to guard or keep our hearts. Everything comes out of it for good or ill in our lives. That is why love and purity and commitment must be established *there* of all places, which, of course, is the hardest place to establish them, in that secret place where we imagine we are alone and cannot be seen.

Now, there is the Christian life: a life lived for love, by faith, and from the heart. What a grand thing it is; what a high thing! What a noble purpose for one's existence! What a demanding calling! But can anyone deny that the life that Peter describes here is the best kind of life, the life that everyone knows is the life that *ought to be*. To forsake our own interests for those of others, which we can successfully do only by a constant laying hold of the present Lord Christ for help, and to do all of this as much in our hearts as with our hands and voices, which means that we will not be doing it hypocritically, insincerely. It is one of our worst sins, yours and mine, that we make this titanic thing called the Christian life into something so pedestrian, so predictable, so ordinary, and so unimpressive. It is not! It is so high and so great a life that you and I only see glimpses of it here and there as we live our lives. Only from time to time have we managed to live it as it ought to be lived and when we did so, it was wonderful beyond words!

Oh no! Far too many Christians and far too many of us too much of the time find ourselves in this

description of modern American life.

"Making of career of nothing -- wandering through malls, killing time, making small talk, watching television programs until we know their characters better than we know our own children -- [which not only] robs the community of our gifts and energies [but] shapes life into a yawn at the God and Savior of the world. The person who will not bestir [himself], the person who hands herself over to nothing, in effect says to God: you have made nothing of interest and redeemed no one of consequence, including me." [Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 188.]

No, not for us, brothers and sisters, not for us. We have few enough years to live for Christ in this world. Let us not delay to make the most of this magnificent life we have been redeemed, called, and empowered to live, to the glory of God, the honor of Christ, and the amazement of men. If you love others the way that Peter tells you to love them here, you cover a multitude of sins; you use your gifts with a view to blessing and helping others and you will amaze a large number of people. Can we do much better than we have so far done? Of course we can. Charles Spurgeon put it this way: "It is our ambition to be great believers rather than great thinkers; to be child-like in faith... What the Lord has spoken he is able to make good; and none of his words shall fall to the ground." [MTP, vol. 36, 304]