

# CHURCH IMPROVEMENT

## FINDING OUR PLACE ON THE JOB

### I PETER 4:7-11

#### CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

#### INTRODUCTION

My intention throughout January is to examine the biblical basis of five of the 10 core values of RHCC. The value I planned to speak about this morning is: "We believe every follower of Christ is to use their gifts and abilities to serve God, his people and his world in every way he calls them to." In planning the series last November I picked out a passage that mentions Christians using their gifts to serve each other. However, when I came to study the passage this week, I discovered that while the use of spiritual gifts is part of what this passage is about, it is not the main thing. The question this discovery raised for me is this, Do I ignore the context and speak about spiritual gifts exclusively and thus fulfill my aim in this series or do I explain the text and therefore not focus on spiritual gifts exclusively? It really isn't very difficult for me to answer that question because I am persuaded that what you and I need is to hear from God, not me. God's agenda is far more important than my agenda. So we will aim to understand and apply what God says through Peter and in the process we will learn some things about spiritual gifts.

I want you to look with me at I Peter 4: 7-11 and see the structure of the passage so you can see how I have outlined it. The passage begins with a statement of fact: "The end of all things is near". The "all things" refers to the entire created universe. Now that Jesus has come and died and rose again and is now sitting at God's right hand, everything is ready for God to end the world and create a new heavens and a new earth. The end of this whole created universe could come at any time. Notice that immediately following this statement of fact there is a "therefore". As always we need to ask, what is it there for? The answer is quite simply that Peter gives us 4 commands about how we are to live and then a summary statement regarding our motivation for living. What he says is this: God is about to end the universe as we know it therefore, here is how you should live.

If you knew for certain that the world was going to end this afternoon, what would you do? If you knew without a doubt that this afternoon you would see Jesus Christ return and destroy this whole world and rescue out of the destruction all those who believed in him, what would you do? Peter is going to tell us what God thinks your answer ought to be. What Peter says here is something that the entire NT says.

- Jesus in Luke 12:40 says: "You also must be ready because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."
- Paul says in Phil. 4:5 "The Lord is near" (He is not talking about God's presence in our lives now but that his coming is near.)
- Hebrews 10:36-37 says, "You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while, 'He who is coming will come and will not delay.'"
- James says in 5: 7-9, "Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming...be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near...The Judge is standing at the door!"

If you are paying attention you will immediately have a problem with these verses. All of them were written close to 2000 years ago and yet Jesus has still not come. Were they wrong? No, they were not wrong. The OT prophesied repeatedly that when Messiah showed up then would begin the process of God restoring his creation to its original condition. The only question the OT leaves unanswered is how long will it take once Messiah shows up for him to complete the restoration of the world? When Jesus leaves, he leaves that question unanswered as well, but because he, the Messiah, has come, we know that the stage is set and the final act could begin at any moment. "The end of all things is near."

Dr. D.A. Carson uses this analogy. It's like we are walking along a cliff, parallel to it. We can walk along that cliff for a long time but at every moment we are very near to falling off. In the same way, we are very near to the appearing of Christ, he could come at any time. Only God knows when that time will be. As far as we are concerned it could be today. The cliff, which is Christ's return, is only a few feet away. So the Christian must live with a conscious awareness that today this entire world, as we know it, could cease to exist and a whole new world and way of living could be instituted. Peter tells us in this passage how we should live in light of the fact that the world as we know it could end today.

#### MAIN POINT

**God is about to end the universe as we know it therefore...**

#### **I. Be sane and sober so you can pray (v. 7b)**

“To be clear-minded” literally means, “don't think like a person who is out of touch with reality”, “think correctly about reality”. A mother of a friend of mine has been paranoid schizophrenic for as long as he can remember. When she doesn't take her medication she is convinced that her husband, my friend's father, is a Russian spy who is holding her captive. She is not in touch with reality. If it's true God can show up at any time, don't live like a mentally ill person and ignore that fact. Then he tells us, not only to think sensibly about reality but also we must not act like a drunk person who has no control over himself. We must carefully control how we use our time and invest our resources. We are to think correctly and control ourselves for prayer.

It makes no sense to say you are a Christian and thereby confess that you expect Jesus to show up at any minute and then to give little or no attention to becoming a person of prayer. What Peter's implying is that to be a prayerless person is to be a person who is out of touch with reality, whose life is out of control. You are like a person suffering from mental illness. You're like a drunk person, stumbling down the street. You're like the law student who has to take the bar exam in three months but who never studies for it and on the night before the 10 hour test stays up all night at a party. That is not a sensible way to live. It is a life that is out of control. You're like the person living in South Carolina this last fall who knows that hurricane Mitch is going to hit the next day but who does nothing to prepare and acts as if nothing is going to happen. He spends his day planting flowers & mowing the lawn rather than boarding the windows and packing the car. In both of these cases the person needs to think correctly about the situation and then discipline themselves to prepare for it. God says the first thing you need to do in light of the fact that the universe as you know it could end today is pray.

In light of the fact that Christ can return at any moment what do you need more of, TV or God? Money or God? Clothes or God? A clean house or God? A perfectly manicured lawn or God? A promotion or God?

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#### **II. Love Christians intensely (v. 8)**

While we walk along the precipice of Christ's return we are not only to pursue God in prayer but we also are to have a deep, intense love for other Christians. If you are a person who actually believes what the NT says about the imminent, at any moment, return of Jesus, then you will give attention to the one who is about to show up in prayer. And you will also give affection and large amounts of your time and attention to those with whom you will spend eternity.

But what is fascinating about Peter's instruction here is why he tells us that we are to love other Christians intensely. Notice what he says, “because love covers over a multitude of sins”. I love the Bible because it is so real and practical. Look at what Peter is saying! Christians sin a lot against one another and your love needs to

be so great that it gladly covers over all the ways other Christians are going to hurt you. They will disappoint you, say mean things to you or about you, be insensitive and rude and not appreciate your ideas. Listen, if you believe that you will not or should not be sinned against by other Christians, you are not living in reality.

There are two things that “cover over” does not mean. It does not mean you ignore the evil done against you by other Christians. This is not saying that if you feel hurt by the words or behavior of another Christian you are necessarily wrong. This is obvious. How can you “cover over” sins if you don’t know you’ve been sinned against? Second, there is a very wicked way in which this verse is sometimes used. It is used by people engaged in doing evil and then telling others that it’s none of their business or encouraging others to lie in order to cover up the evil. In its extreme form we see this in alcoholic families where mom and the children cover up for dad’s drunkenness. Or in abusive families where the wife who is being abused covers up for the abusing husband. Or in the church where a pastor or other leader is abusing his authority and the church covers it up by never confronting him. The Bible is very clear that when we know that a person who professes faith in Christ is doing evil we are not to cover it up but to expose it by confronting the person and then involving the leadership of the church in the confrontation if the person refuses to change.

What does it mean to cover over the multitude of sins that are done to me by other Christians? It means I forgive, I forbear and I refuse to gossip. Psalm 32: 1 says, “Blessed is the man whose transgressions have been forgiven, whose sins have been covered over.” To forgive means that for the sake of love, I choose to not make you pay for the injury you have done to me. I will not treat you the way you deserve but will treat you as if you had not harmed me and as if I truly love you. I will seek your good, even though you have hurt me. Paul says in Col. 3:13, “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” When you decide to love another human being you are deciding to suffer. This is something that our comfort seeking culture does not know. Not knowing this about love is the number one cause of divorce. Strangers can’t hurt me. I don’t really care what a stranger thinks of me or how he treats me, at least not for very long. But, if my wife or children say or do something that hurts me, that I feel and remember for a long time. If a Christian friend ignores me, that stings. So, I need to be madly in love with you so that when you offend me I forbear and I forgive the injury you do to me. Proverbs 11:13 says, “A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man covers over a matter.” Covering over the sins of others also means that I do not gossip about the failings of others.

If you ever leave this church because you were hurt by something someone said or did, you are not living like a Christian. There are reasons to leave churches, but being hurt by someone else is not one of them. Christians love to follow Christ in loving others by suffering. The suffering that usually involves is the suffering of being hurt by the sins of others and yet persisting in love towards them. This means that when you are hurt by another’s sin you either go to God and release them in his presence (that’s forbearance) or you go to the person and tell them you have been hurt and seek to be reconciled. It means that when you know that you have offended another person, you go to them and seek their forgiveness.

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### **III. Provide for Christians practically and cheerfully (v. 9)**

People who know that Jesus could show up at any time are involved in making sure that the practical needs of the other members of the family are being met. And they don’t complain about having to help out. There needs to be a warm, inviting attitude about us that welcomes people into our midst and makes them feel at home. There needs to be a generous spirit among us that freely uses the material resources God has given us to help the other members of the church to survive and thrive.

I've been so encouraged by the many ways I've seen you do this for one another. This last week was a perfect example, as 9 families generously opened their homes and allowed up to 25 people to invade for the purpose of prayer. A year ago a family visited our church, the parents were both unemployed and on the spot one of you gave an anonymous financial gift to them. I've seen a number of you provide meals for families who were sick or just had a baby or some other crisis. A very large number of you provide refreshments every week to encourage an atmosphere of sharing and welcome after our worship service. People who know that this entire world order is going to be swept away and replaced by the kingdom of God and his Christ are glad to share the material resources God has given them.

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#### **IV. Serve Christians with the gift(s) God has given you (vv. 10-11a)**

The command in this verse is that we all are to serve one another. The NT knows nothing of spectator Christianity. Every person who calls himself or herself a Christian is to be engaged in serving other Christians. But notice that the way we are to serve is through using the gift that each of us has been given. The gift that Peter is referring to here is not material, like a house, a car, money. Rather the gift that is being referred to here is an ability given to us by God. Everything you have and are was given by God and so any ability you have that God uses to strengthen the faith of another person is a spiritual gift. That is the NT definition of a spiritual gift: An ability a Christian has that God uses to strengthen the faith of another. There are three things that make an ability a spiritual gift: First, the person who possesses the ability is a Christian. Second, the Christian uses that ability for the express purpose of building up the faith of another person. Third, God causes the use of that ability to actually meet the need of the person served.

The end of v. 10 literally says, "like a faithful steward of the diverse grace of God." What this means is this. Every ability you possess as a Christian is a gift from God. God has given you these abilities for the purpose of helping others to experience the love of God and grow in their love for God. As Jesus told his disciples, "Freely you have received, freely give." So as I look at other people I am asking, how can I help this person know the love of God in deeper ways and trust God in greater ways? My basic attitude, as a Christian, towards other people, especially other Christians, is how can I use my gift to help this person?

Peter goes on to give us the two broad categories of gifts that God gives to us. Read v. 11a. There are verbal gifts and there are action or serving gifts. Both kinds of gifts are necessary if a church is going to help those who come to the church to grow in faith. In our culture that is so infected with an anti-truth virus there is a prejudice against speaking gifts. The cliché, "I'd rather see a sermon than hear a sermon any day" is anti-biblical. You will never grow in your knowledge of God's love if you are not regularly served by God's people who have the various speaking gifts as well as by those who have the serving gifts. A church full of people exercising both kinds of gifts represents Jesus on the earth. In Acts 1:1, Luke summarizes Jesus' earthly ministry this way, "In my former book... I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach." When we serve others by using the gifts, both speaking and serving, that God has given us, we are continuing the work of Jesus.

Next Peter tells us how we are to exercise our gifts in the service of others. If your gift is a speaking gift (like teaching, evangelism, prophecy, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, singing, comforting people in their grief, confronting people in their sin, discernment, a parent sharing wisdom with a child, etc.) then you need to make sure that when you speak for the purpose of helping others to know and love Christ more that you are saying what God wants said. There are two things that "as one speaking the very words of God" means. First, whenever you speak as a Christian for the purpose of building others, you need to take what you say with utmost seriousness. Every time you teach or encourage, what you say will be used by God either to save the

other person or to damn the other person. So take it very serious. Second, it means that you had better make sure that what you are saying lines up with God's word. My words only have authority as they accurately communicate "the Word." When you take upon yourself the mantle of speaking on behalf of God, which is what you do whenever you speak as an act of service aimed at encouraging another's faith, you are going to be held accountable by God for the accuracy of your speech.

If your gift is an action oriented gift (Like making meals for the sick, running the sound board, giving money to the poor, healing, performing miracles, fixing cars, remodeling homes, serving food to the hungry, setting up chairs, designing a web page, etc.) you need to make sure that you are performing the service in the strength that God gives, not in your own, human energy. How do you serve "as if serving out of the strength which God supplies"? We are to perform the act of service as if God is right there supervising and giving us everything we need to serve with excellence. Let me take setting up the chairs for worship service as an example. If you set up chairs as if your setting them up was out of the strength which God supplies you would do it as if God were sitting at the front of the room and giving the directions on how to set them up. And as if God was watching how you did it and with what kind of an attitude you did it. You would do it as if God was actually giving you every bit of the physical energy required to do the act. You do it with this perspective because both things are true. He is watching and all the strength you have for doing it comes directly from him.

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## **V. Rejoice in God alone (v. 11b)**

The second half of v. 11 tells us to do all these things for this one purpose: so that God will be glorified. In other words, our motivation for praying, loving intensely, being hospitable and serving one another is so that God will be seen to be a great and gracious God and others will join with us in loving him. This brings us back to where Peter started. God is about to show up and if you are a Christian this makes you totally excited because you love God supremely. You delight in him so much and you cannot wait to be with him and you yearn to have more and more people know and love and appreciate him. This is what motivates you to pray, love and serve. This is Christian living. Christianity isn't about duty and morality. It is about having a heart that is madly in love with God and so loves to love others so they will be madly in love with God.

Permit me to use my love of deer hunting to show how this works. I love our annual trip to northern WI with my dad and brothers to pursue the wily whitetail. I want my sons to enjoy it as well. So since they were little I have told them stories of the glory of hunting. When I'm with my brothers and have my sons around we love to talk about past hunts and plan for future ones. I made sure that my sons went through hunter safety classes and learned how to respect and handle guns. I've read stories of deer hunting to them. When they turn 10 I take them with me to go along while I hunt. Then, when they turn 12, they get to carry a gun for the first time. I love hunting and I love it when my sons love hunting and so I love to do things that help them enjoy hunting.

This is exactly what Peter is saying here. If you are a Christian, then you rejoice in, are delighted with God. You know that he is about to show up in all his glory and power. You want as many people as possible to know the happiness that God gives because you love it when others are delighted with God. So, you pray, you love, you forgive, you don't gossip, you provide practically for others and you use your gifts to serve others so that as many as possible will join you in glorifying Jesus when he comes.

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- *Rejoice in God alone*

## PRAY

COMMUNION: Emphasize the fact that we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes through this act.

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