

*7 The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. 8 Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Be hospitable to one another without complaint. 10 As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good **stewards of the manifold grace of God**. 11 Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving 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.*

2 weeks ago we began this section and just took a thorough look at vs. 7.

And we said that we christians are to live in expectancy. The next event on God's calendar is the end of all things. The consumation of all things is at hand. A 7 year period of events that culminates in the glorious return of Jesus Christ to this earth to depose Satan and set up His kingdom on Davids throne in Israel.

But we are to live in expectancy because the beginning of these events is the removal of the church. On a day we do not know, we will be called to meet the Lord in the air. That day is known only by the Father and we are called to live circumspectly, to be found living obediently, serving our King when He comes for us.

Those ideas are the basis for Peter's words to us in these verses. It seemed to them as it seems to us, that it must be very soon. It could happen in our lifetimes. It could happen today.

Therefore, how do we live. Does that imminent return affect how we are to live. According to Peter, it does. We are to be found, when Jesus comes, living out these words of Peter's.

We also said last time that we are in a far more dangerous situation than even Peter's first century readers. Their situation was that they were being openly persecuted. Some were losing their property. Some were

going to prison. Some were even dieing. Peter would be crucified upside down a few years after he wrote these words.

You say, that sounds more dangerous than our situation. No. Ours is the most diabolical ever conceived. We live in ease, and comfort, and plenty, and security, and like the 10 virgins waiting for the bride groom, the church in our land, has gone to sleep.

The mindset that Peter wrote these words in is completely foreign to us. Peter writes to people who are in survival mode, hunkered down, dug in, waiting for the day when the Lord comes in power and glory to take them out of this hostile place. Bombs are exploding all around them, spiritually.

Our situation is different. We have been lulled to sleep, and it's hard for us to take any of this very seriously. Peter seems to be an alarmist. Survivalism seems . . . unnecessary. I don't see the church in America paying any attention to these marching orders, mostly. Some are.

Never-the-less, these words were never rescinded. This is how the church is supposed to survive. Even in ease and luxury, we should live as though a tidal wave is just offshore about to roll over this place. My fear is that the church will indeed be caught sleeping.

So Peter's survival mode orders for the church, after the word therefore *The end of all things is at hand; therefore* is threefold. A threefold triad of linked arms that will sustain the church through any event.

We looked at the first in vs. 7. A vertical connection with our God. A right mind, a spiritually safety regulated mindset based in a knowledge and obedience of the Word of God, this book, and an alertness to what our adversary is doing, and finally, a continuing conversation with our God. He speaks to us through His book, we speak to Him in prayer. At all times.

The other two arms in this triad that we'll look at this morning in vss 8 - 11 are the horizontal connection, one with another, and finally how God himself joins in with all of us, and uses us as pipelines from Him to each

other.

Let's pick it up in vs. 8. The vertical connection is in place. We are communing with our God, daily, continually, meditating on His words, this book, and conversing with Him, always, in prayer. That's what real christians do, if not, check your pulse.

That in place, the next order from Peter is: *8 Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.*

The vertical in place, the next thing is to go horizontal. And we do that by loving each other.

Agapen describes a love that is not a reciprocal cause and effect love. It's a love that stubbornly loves the unlovable, no matter what. It defines how God loved us when we were broken, filthy, vile, sinful beings who were in rebellion against Him.

His love is not based in our desirability. He doesn't love us because we are lovely. He loves us because He is love. And that love must purchase us out of our lostness and filth at an extreme price. The death of His only Son!

And now that we belong to Him, He says, you go love your brothers . . . with that kind of love.

Peter likes to use extreme descriptors. Extreme words and he does so here when he tells us how to love each other. He says keep fervent in your love. And that word fervent is extreme. Extreme effort.

In greek literature that word is used to define the effort of an athlete who is in a race, and the veins in his neck are bulging because he is at maximum effort. Extreme effort. This is extreme love.

We'll see several avenues in which that extreme love plays out to each other. And the first one is in the next part of the verse. *Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.*

Love covers a multitude of sins. What does that mean?

The church is a body of believers, and there are mechanisms in place, given to us by Jesus, in Matthew 18 and also spoken of by Paul in his epistles that define for us how the church is to deal with sin. Church discipline.

There is a sequence that takes place. First you go to your erring brother alone, and try to lovingly help him see the error and repent.

If he won't hear you, then 2 or 3 more go and try to accomplish the same result. If repentance and restoration is impossible, that person is de-churched. Excommunicated is the ugly word. But even then, the members never stop trying to restore the person, if possible, and bring him back in the same manner any first time repentor would come.

I say all of that in order to say this. 99.99 percent of the time, those drastic measures should not be needed. Most of the time, and for most kinds of sins, the ones that aren't cancerous to the body, spiritually, what we do is forgive, forgive, forgive and forget it.

Peter learned this important lesson one day as he was walking along with the Lord, while He was here on this earth.

Peter was starting to get it, feeling very magnanimous towards his brothers about forgiveness. In fact it was because of Jesus teaching about forgiving and restoring erring brothers in Matthew 18 that this discussion happened. It was the next thing.

Mt. 18:21 Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

The talmud taught that you should forgive your brother 3 times. After that, drop the bomb on him, or whatever. Write him off.

So Peter thought he was being incredibly generous. Double the talmud and add one more. Seven times!! Holy cow. And Peter thought he'd grown some angel wings coming up with that.

And Jesus effectively blows him up. 70 times 7 Peter. Effectively we are to follow the pattern of our Heavenly Father and never stop forgiving each other.

I believe Peter had this conversation in mind when he talks about love and says, love covers a multitude of sins. 490 is a multitude. If you keep a notebook, a recordbook, the 4 strikes with crosshatches so you can keep track and you're waiting for 490 so you can not forgive . . . guess what, you're the one in trouble. That was Jesus point. You never don't forgive. We never stop forgiving each other.

Christians treat christians like God treats us. Let me tell you from my personal experience. If God stopped forgiving after 490, I'd have never made it to my 2nd year (month?) week? of being a christian. But God always forgives me when I come to Him in repentance. Always. Love covers a multitude of sins.

But also note, repentance is necessary. Mostly. For fleshy sins, where the body of Christ is in danger especially, there has to be real repentance. Love covers a multitude of sins doesn't mean a blanket pass for sin. Sin is cancer. Cancer spreads. So there needs to be some wisdom.

But suppose the Lord see's fit to save some old guy who is just naturally grouchy and miserable. He's no fun to be around. Personality clashes. You say to-may-to and I say to-mah-to. You're meticulously orderly and you come to my garage to help me and you say there's no helping this guy. He's a slob. Just wired differently.

That sort of irritation, born from a God, to whom was pleased to make us all very very different. Those irritations are not cancerous to the body, and you need to love love love those folks. Like a dog that keeps on biting you. Peter says, they belong to God and as such, we love them, unconditionally.

My wife knows, at this point, there's no changing me. My workshop will never be clean. Her house will never be sloppy. If her car is broke and she needs to drive my pickup to work, I take the vacuum out and sweep the floors and throw out all the trash.

The church must accomodate each other a thousand times over. We're all very different. We all stumble in many ways, James says. Forgive, unconditionally, and nonstop. Love, unconditionally, and never stop.

But beware, if cancerous sin comes, we're going to protect this body. We hope it never happens, but if it does, we'll have to cut it out. Always that tension. Love covers a multitude of sins, but it isn't love to allow some kinds of sin to make the whole body sick. Pray for wisdom for your shepherds who hold this responsibility before the Lord.

Then, in the same horizontal vein, christians to christian, Peter says; *9 Be hospitable to one another without complaint.*

The word for hospitality is telling. Understanding the word, means understanding Peter's command.

It's a compound word again. Philoxenos. Philo from which we get the word phileo, brotherly love. And xenos which is the word for new people. Strangers to us. Aliens. Not part of our group . . yet.

When new people join us, we are to love them, unconditionally, the same as we love each other. We are to extend hospitality.

Now in Peter's situation, people under duress, extenuating circumstances, this takes on particular meaning foreign to us. Generally, we agree with Poor Richards Almanac. Fish and visitors have in common, in three days they stink. That's how we view hospitality.

What about situations like we've seen in Syria? Where christians may have to pick up what they can carry and flee for their lives. And they make it safely to . . . your house. Oops. OK, that might be

challenging. Hard for us to imagine. Not so hard for the folks in the circumstances of Peter's hearers.

Peter, unequivocally says, you receive those folks, and you love them. Period. And then he adds, and do it without the (gong-goos-mos'). Complaining.

It's an onomatopoeiac word. That means it sounds like what it is. Grumbling. (gong-goos-mos gong-goos-mos) grumble grumble. We were doing fine. We had just enough for us until those folks showed up. Now nobody has enough. grumble grumble grumble

Peter says you love those folks, and you do it without complaining. Marching orders for the church. It seems very foreign to us. But we may need to remember these words. We know not what the future holds for us.

Those are the vertical relationships in the triad. Love. Paul agrees in his letter to the galatians. If we love each other, you've fulfilled the whole law.

Galatians 5:13 For you, brothers, were called to freedom; but do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. Rather, serve one another in love. 14 The entire Law is fulfilled in a single decree: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 15 But if you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out, or you will be consumed by each other....

The biting and devouring part corresponds to Peter's command to not complain. Paul and Peter, as ever, say the same thing.

And now we come to the part in this triad where the horizontal connection and the vertical connection all work together for the good of the body of Christ and for the glory of God.

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

And here we launch into a doctrine that is totally unique to the church of

the Living God. No other religion has anything similar to what we will see described in these verses. Including many groups that call themselves "christians".

Obviously! Because no other religion has a relational connection with God. We have that connection because He first sought us, called us, and removed our sin.

We are restored, relationally to Him. Adopted as sons and daughters. No other religion makes that claim. No other religion has that vertical connection with God of very God, individually, one on one, that we talked about.

And one of the things that uniquely happens with God's adopted sons and daughters is that He gives each one of us a unique set of spiritual giftings that we become stewards of.

Every born again Holy Spirit filled christian has a compliment of gifts. Spiritual gifts . And God has given those to us - not for us - but for the edification of the rest of the body.

My spiritual gifts aren't for me, they're for you. Likewise, your spiritual gifts aren't for you, they're for me and the rest of the body of Christ.

Peter is very casual about this, as if we already have a grounding in what he's talking about and he doesn't need to re-lay that foundation.

But for us, since this is the first time we've broached this subject, I feel we do need to revisit the foundations of this important and uniquely born again believers doctrine. So we're going to take a moment for some Bible review.

Ephesians 4 is so fantastic, I just want to read the whole chapter. How do you edit any of it!? If you were Paul and wanted to go over all the same things that Peter has just said, what would it sound like?

Why are they so similar? Did Paul get his doctrine from Peter? Did Peter just copy Paul? No, both were apostles of Jesus and they are so

similar because they both have the same source, the Lord Jesus Christ gave the doctrine of the church to His apostles.

And let me just add, for your spiritual safety and well-being, the apostles were the foundations for the church. They were only present in the first century as the church was being formed.

There is a big so-called apostolic movement today. Apostles all over the place getting revelation from God. That's how you get the mormons. New revelation outside of this book. But the 11 apostles who walked with Christ, and the one untimely born, Paul, who also saw Christ on the road to Damascus, are unique and only true apostles.

They got their revelation and doctrine from Jesus. They effectively wrote the New Testament. They are no more. Steer clear of 21st century apostles. The apostles of Jesus were the foundations of the building called the church. We are part of the 21st floor being built in that same building.

When the canon of scripture was complete at the end of the first century, 96AD, the apostles were gone. The foundation was laid. The blueprint is in this book we hold, given to us by those foundational apostles.

Let's look at Ephesians chapter 4 together.

1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

This is how we walk with each other. Just like what Peter said. Love. Tolerance. Worthy of your calling out of this world and into the body of Christ. Humble. Gentle with each other. Patient. Loving each other. And working to preserve unity in this body that belongs to Christ.

4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and

Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

All of the "one's". We're all the same. All of us hold all of these truths in common. We are all part of one body. We all were called by one Spirit. We all have one hope of glory with Christ for eternity. One Lord. One faith. One baptism, which by the way is not water, this is the immersion into the body of Christ by His Spirit. Water is just the outward picture of that inward reality.

One God and Father *who is over all and through all and in all*. God is in us. That one distinction is true of every believer who will rejoice when they see God. The Holy Spirit of God dwells with us and in us. Or we aren't Christians at all.

Everything Paul says here tracks perfectly with what we've been looking at in Peter's letter to Christians. The next part is what we want to get to, because Paul's explanation of the purpose for the spiritual gifts is clearer than Peter's brief mention.

7But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Every Christian. Each one has received a grace gift measured to us by Christ. Paul says that. Peter says that. Then Paul show us an old testament prophecy

8Therefore it says,

*“WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH,
HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES,
AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN.”*

The quote is from Psalms 68:18. A direct connection and prophecy that God would take captive some who were captives. A marvelous and obscure verse that I hope some day we can go deeper into.

Christ descended to take captivity captive. We were captives of Satan. Born into slavery to him. Helpless. And Christ came and bought the captives out of their slavery, and now we are sweet captives of Him.

9(Now this expression, “He ascended,” what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.)

That is a marvelous description of our redemption. He came. He purchased us with His blood. He takes a host of the captives of Satan, captive to Himself and leads them into glory in the heavens. Breathtaking.

But we only stop to consider that in passing. It's the next sentence that launches us into what we do while we're in a holding pattern here on earth waiting for the redemption to be complete. *..AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN.*”

Every christian. Every christian has these things that make them both the same, all of the one's that we all have in common, and then the unique gifts that Jesus has given to every true believer. Why? What are they for?

11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

There is so much doctrine in those verses. If we ever get to study the letter to the church at Ephesus together we could spend some glorious time together trying to unpack all of that. And unpack is a good word because Paul really packs so much weight into so few words.

But what we want to hi-grade from all of this richness for our specific use this morning is this. God gave us spiritual gifts *12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;*

Each of us has a plurality of gifts that we are to be stewards of. Remember Peter's word, stewards. A steward is someone who doles out resources that don't belong to him, in measured amounts to the recipients who belong to the master / owner of those resources.

A steward is accountable to the one who owns the resources. A stewardship is a trust given to a trustworthy person who distributes things that belong to someone else and then gives an accounting of whether the masters gifts were properly distributed. A steward is just a middle man. But a middle man who is accountable.

God has given us gifts and told us to distribute those gifts to others for a specific purpose. *12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;*

We use our spiritual gifts, that don't really belong to us, in order that these three things should occur. Other christians will be built up by the use of our gifts. The saints will be equipped. Built up. Edified. Ready to do service for others, so that the entire body of christians thrives in some measure, because of what Christ gave to them using us as the pipe line.

God pours out His grace so that you can thrive, but He does it using me as the pipeline to you. God pours out His grace so that I can thrive, but He uses you as a pipeline to get that grace to me.

Some of you will recall that when I agreed to take the responsibilities of this pulpit, I did so with some spoken reservations. Lots of reservations.

Those reservations are not bourne in some false humility. My reservations are bourne out in my understanding of what Peter and Paul are teaching us here.

Ideally, a pastor of a tiny church needs to have a plurality of gifts that cover a whole bunch of bases so that all the various and sundry needs of the congregation of believers can be met. I don't have those gifts.

I told you that I'm a one trick pony. The only thing I really bring to this

job is that God has given me at least in some measure this one gift. I can teach you this book.

11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

There are no more apostles. That foundation is laid way down on the foundations to the first floor. And I believe that also applies to prophets. There are no people receiving prophecy in the sense that John the apostle did. Direct revelation of future events. Also first century. Recorded for us in this canon of scripture.

I'm not an evangelist. I'm responsible to evangelise, but that is definitely not my gift. And the next part is the scariest. I'm really not a pastor. I'm not warm and fuzzy. I'm shy and self conscious. I have a terrible inferiority complex that I beat myself up with daily.

I'm like a mesquite bush in the desert that expels poison so that no other mesquite bushes will grow anywhere close to it. Can't seem to help that. Sorry. I'm prickly, and people don't gravitate in my direction. Usually it works the opposite.

And that's OK. That was how God made me, and it took me over 50 years to finally come to the realization that, even with all of the hopeless flaws, I wouldn't trade my gifts for anyone else's that I've met so far.

God made me smart, and he gave me hands that can fix things. He gave me some creative artistic talents. None of that helps you folks much, but the one thing He did give me that is useful to you is the final thing in this abbreviated list. By the way, next time we meet we'll look at some longer lists in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. Hold that thought.

So, frighteningly enough, the only thing I really bring to this job is the final thing in Paul's list here. I can teach you this book. That's sort of it. Not ideal for a tiny church.

It might have been better if I were the teaching pastor in a larger group that had other pastors gifted with wisdom and knowledge who were

warm and fuzzy who could go and help the saints with all of their problems.

But God didn't see fit to do it that way. Or maybe that was plan A, and my own willful disobedience and unfaithfulness finally got me to plan Z which isn't ideal, but that's where we wound up.

All of that to say this. The only way this church can work is for you all to discover the unique gifts that God has entrusted to you as stewards, and it's up to you folks to minister to each other in all of these other things that I am hopelessly flawed to accomplish.

Look around you, that is already happening in some measure. We have dear ladies scrambling to try to minister to the children that God is bringing to us. What a privilege and blessing that is.

And we have people scrambling to try to bring us worship in the form of music. And we have people behind the scenes, we're so small that everyone knows who they are, who are scrambling to make all the other things happen to keep the doors open and keep some semblance of a tiny church.

We're holding our own, but we aren't really gaining much ground, are we. Next time we meet, I plan to walk through Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 and talk about all of the different gifts that Paul will mention in those chapters.

For now, I'll close by reminding you. Every christian in every pew who shares in common all of those "one's" that Paul spoke of that we hold in common, also bears the responsibility of a stewardship to a Master to distribute to the saints that belong to Him, the gifts that He has put in their charge. More on that next time.