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A Reason for Self-Denial

Kevin Freeman / General

1 Peter / 1 Peter 4:1–11

As Christians, we understand our call to follow Christ and live for Him, but we can also become preoccupied with the cares of this fallen world. Today's text helps us flesh out what it means to live by the Spirit of Christ indwelling us. Peter gives us a pattern of self-denial that allows God's grace in us to be on full display.

Consider the Time

Sometimes our perception of time passing is different from reality. We all know that time tends to pass by quickly when we are either busy or having fun, and that it seems to pass more slowly when we are either bored or folding laundry. That is why later you might find yourself saying, "That sermon was the longest twenty-five minutes of my life!"

Here are some other examples that may surprise your relative expectations of time.

- John Tyler, the tenth president of the United States, whose first term began in 1841, still has two living grandchildren. Tyler himself was born 230 years ago in 1790, just 7 years after the War for Independence ended.
- The American Civil War ended in 1865, but the last pension paid to a spouse was in 2008, when Maudie Hopkins died. But the last Civil War pension paid to anyone was in May of 2020. Irene Triplett qualified as a child who could receive the pension due to disability, so she had been receiving her monthly \$73.13 government checks.
- The Chicago Cubs won the World Series in 2016. Before that victory, you could rightly say that the last time they won, the Ottoman Empire was still around! The Cubbies won back to back in 1908 and 1909, but the Ottoman Empire hung around until 1922, when its territories were divided following World War I.
- The Aztecs seem quite ancient to us, but their empire was not founded until two hundred years after the founding of Oxford University, which began in 1096.
- The first major wagon train headed West on the Oregon Trail in 1843, which was the same year the fax machine was invented. Talk about old technology.
- Cleopatra, the famous Egyptian ruler, lived closer to the construction of the first McDonald's than she did the construction of the pyramids and the Sphinx.[i][ii]

One thing seems ancient and the other modern, yet we may be surprised about which precedes the other. I mention this time trivia because in our passage today we are told to consider time. Specifically, we are told to consider what our time that we have left is for. This comes from 1 Peter 4; feel free to turn there in your Bibles. There is a time for one sort of activity and a time for another sort. As our students head back to school, virtually or otherwise, they will be reminded that there's a time for studying and a time for Instagram. There are also certain times, seasons of life, that we are not meant to return to. For example, I was talking with one of our volunteers here this week who shared that his time for crazy roller coasters is coming to an end. The next time he finds himself at the entrance of the Anaconda at King's Dominion, he will want to remember Peter's words and consider the time.

But the point is less about roller coasters and more about lifestyle. As Christians, we must remember the time has come for a new type of living, one that is not about self-fulfillment but rather self-denial. Our culture promotes a have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too mindset. We can achieve self-fulfillment and self-denial simultaneously, right? Well, no. Jesus himself said that no man can serve two masters. So Peter reminds us today, **it's time to follow Jesus wholeheartedly.** In

our distracted, this is a message we need to hear. 1 Peter 4:1-11 tells us both why and how to do this successfully. If you are able, please stand as I read.

1 Peter 4:1–11 ESV

¹ Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,

² so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.

³ For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry.

⁴ With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you;

⁵ but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

⁶ For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.

⁷ The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.

⁸ Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

⁹ Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

¹⁰ As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace:

¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Last week we discovered in the second half of 1 Peter 3 that zeal for righteousness and a willingness to share our hope in Christ allows us to follow in the footsteps of our Savior. It also invites suffering. Suffering with the right mindset involves self-denial. Continuing with the argument, Peter offers two ways to embody this Christlike mindset.

1.) Live attentive to God's will.

First, we must **live attentive to God's will**. Verses 1-6 explain this.

What does living attentive to God's will entail?

Fortified in Mindset.

It involves "arming ourselves" with a certain way of thinking, to be **fortified in our mindset**. A person cannot live out self-denial without applying some heavily armed thinking. Our minds don't naturally gravitate toward denying ourselves. So we need to apply some armor to our thoughts. Peter tells us, "Arm yourselves with the same way of thinking." What way? The way of suffering in the flesh as Christ did. Our call to imitate Christ doesn't stop at the road to Golgotha. It continues to the cross, the tomb, and beyond.

Just as Jesus suffered in the flesh unto death, so we must consider ourselves to have suffered unto death as well.

This is not, we shall see, simply a willingness to suffer in this way if we are faced with such a situation. It is rather a consideration that we have already suffered in this way. Paul, in Galatians 2:20, does not say, "I am willing to be crucified with Christ." He says,

Galatians 2:20 ESV

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Freedom from Sin.

Considering ourselves to have suffered to the point of death as Jesus did brings **freedom from sin**. Peter shares that “whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.” You might think, “I’ve suffered in the flesh, and I still sin. Back in July I went to the beach without wearing sunscreen. Oh I *suffered* in the *flesh*! Why do I still sin?” The point here is suffering as Christ - having been crucified with him - to the point of death. Dead people don’t sin. As morbid as this might seem, we are to think of ourselves as having died, at least when it comes to sin. That’s why Paul writes in Rom 6:11,

Romans 6:11 ESV

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Our thinking is the key.

Christians still give into their passions because they have not fortified their minds to consider that through Christ we have indeed died to sin.

Recalibrated passions.

This leads to the third characteristic: **Recalibrated passions**. Bible describes all of the worldly desires that get us in trouble in this fallen world. Once we fortify our minds with the mindset that we have already “suffered in the flesh” to the point of death, we can confront the temptation to live for our own pleasure by saying, “Wait. I have already died to this sort of life.”

Worldly passions lose their hold for the one who has followed in the footsteps of our suffering Savior.

Here is the thing about passions. Restrained and directed, they are the beautiful realization of natural, God-given desires and emotions. Unrestrained, they spiral out of control into ugly futility. We live in a society that encourages hedonism - to live according to your passions for your own, personal fulfillment. This is a circular reasoning that has no regulator, no calibration. The reasoning states that you should pursue your own, personal enjoyment for the sake of your own, personal enjoyment. That’s a recipe for passions that will metastasize.

Passions must be governed by our thinking and not the other way around.

Remember, we are told in Romans 12:2 that renewed thinking is the key to transformation.

Romans 12:2 ESV

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

What does this allow us to do? It allows us to live to passionately pursue God’s will. To live as he called us to live. This is not a step down from where we once were. It’s a giant leap forward to what we were meant for. When we find that, all that was once attractive loses its sheen. This is what hymn writer Helen Lemmel described so vividly:

*“Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.”*

Do you ever try something that you used to enjoy and find it no longer enjoyable?

When I was a kid I loved bath time. I could spend over an hour, it seemed soaking in the suds while playing with cars or army men. Now the idea of taking a bath has grown strangely dim for me. It just doesn’t seem enjoyable, although I like the idea of one of my kids spending an hour or so in the tub.

And there are certain practices that have grown strangely dim for believers. Peter emphasizes that time has past. He describes actions and attitudes that we should now avoid. It is not meant to be a complete list, but we get the message.

The rest of our time here is not for pursuing our own passions but rather God's will. The old time has passed. Now we have a clear purpose, and a reason to live beyond our own appetites.

But for those who are still ruled by their own passions, this is incomprehensible. We expect to be maligned by those who do not understand that we have died to that old, futile way of living. They are in what Peter calls a "flood of debauchery." They may think they are in the ark, but they are out in the flood, not realizing we will all one day give an account to God, our righteous Judge, for how we live.

Some people get confused by verse 6, which references the gospel being "preached even to those who are dead." After someone dies, does Jesus give them a personal gospel presentation? That sure would be nice, but it would nullify much of Scripture. Paul's missionary journeys would become well-meaning fool's errands. Why go share the gospel if our Savior can do it in a much better setting? Jesus's parting commission to go and make disciples would be reduced to aspiration. Our purpose here on earth as ambassadors for Christ would be stripped of its ultimate meaning. And direct Scripture, explaining that judgment comes right after death, would be in direct contradiction. No, God's plan for reaching people with the gospel is through good, old fashioned marble moving. Our faith conversations are how people learn about Jesus's saving message. We are the ones who are called to share the message, and it happens in this life.

So what do we make of Peter's comment? It is easy to understand his meaning with one clarifying word: Now. "For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are NOW dead." First century believers had yet to experience a single generation between Christ's first coming and his second. They lived with such an imminent expectation of Jesus's return that they had some serious questions about what happened when Christ followers died. Multiple New Testament passages take some time to explain this concept to early Christians. Peter is referencing those believers who accepted the gospel message and later died. The gospel message was preached to them because although they have been judged in the flesh - meaning they died an earthly death - they will experience eternal life.

Those who reject God scoff at Christians who do not give into a lifestyle of hedonistic self-gratification, little realizing that it will all come to an abrupt halt when it is time to give an account before the righteous Judge. You may have heard the term *YOLO* thrown around. It stands for You Only Live Once. This encourages people to make the most of this life only, believing it to be the only one we live for. Christians may want to adopt their own term to remind us our time is spent living for God. Perhaps *YODO* for You Only Die Once. Or maybe *YOLT* for You Only Live Twice. Or maybe *YOGABORGO*, for You Only Give an Account Before Out Righteous God Once. Or maybe we should just follow God's advice through Peter. Live our remaining time passionately for God's will, because we consider ourselves to have already died to our old, futile lifestyle.

2.) Serve the church with God's power.

This readies us to learn how to live for God's will. Peter tells us to **serve the church with God's power**. Peter reminds us that "the end of all things is at hand," another reference to considering the time. It's running short. The word used can mean approach or draw near. We should have the same mindset these early believers have. Any day now, God may choose to bring about the end. The end times could begin. Christ could return. It could be today. Considering this, we must prioritize three things.

Emphasize prayer.

First, we must **emphasize prayer**. We want God to hear our prayers for the building and perseverance of His Church. With this in mind, Peter warns us to be self-controlled and sober-minded. Why? It is not so that we look good or can live in contentment. It is for the sake of our prayers. God reminds us in the Bible that He pays attention to our lifestyle, and it matters for our prayer life.

God takes our maturing character into account as He hears our prayers.

James 5:16

James 5:16 NLT

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.

Your conduct impacts your prayer life. This does not mean God will never answer the prayer from someone living a sinful lifestyle. He wants all to call on Him, but those not living according to His will would presumably offer prayers of repentance. This is normal, and parents see this all the time. If your child has just thrown a tantrum and then asks for ice cream, do you give it? Probably not. Parents know it would be harmful to their children to reward inappropriate behavior by honoring their request. Instead, they patiently help them see the affects of both bad behaviors and good. That is why parents gladly say yes as often as possible to their kids who are maturing well and living right.

Time is running short in this world. The more we can be about God's business as his followers, the more God will answer our prayers and work through us.

Earnestly love.

Second, we must **earnestly love one another**. If we were simply told to love one another, we could check this off our list and move along, but Peter describes the character of this love: *earnestly*. That word takes our love up a notch. It describes a diligence to our loving. It should have a continuous zeal as we the Church seek ways to love each other. While we should love all people, believers are commanded to show special love for fellow Christ followers. Jesus told us this is how the world will know we follow Him, by loving each other.

Peter mentions that love covers a multitude of sins. Our earnest love should be greater than any sinful action disrupting it. That does not mean ignoring sin. Often it means lovingly confronting it but never holding it against one another. 1 Corinthians 13:5, ***"Love keeps no record of wrongs."***

1 Corinthians 13:5 NIV

It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Expect supernatural strength.

Finally, we must **expect supernatural strength**. Peter addresses some different spiritual giftings. He says that as each of us has received a gift, "use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."

What is a steward? It comes from an Old English term, *stiward*, which means the ward of a house or hall. Stewards manage another's property or finances. It belongs to another, but they must handle it rightly. We are stewards of something much more valuable: God's varied grace. It is of infinite value!

I think we accidentally downplay spiritual gifts sometimes. We know they are gifts from God, but we think of them through the lens of our own interests and talents. The spiritual gift of administration, one might claim, belongs to a person who is talented as an administrator and enjoys that sort of work. The person who uses the gift relies on his or her administrative skills. The way we describe it completely cuts out the supernatural element. Any non-Christian could use almost identical terms, even to the point of claiming to be gifted at administration.

We must look at our gifts differently. Passion and talent are not excluded, but God's strength should be the hallmark. We should use our gifts in the expectation that God's power will shine through our weaknesses. If we have a speaking gift, we should use it with a confident reverence that we get to voice the oracles of God. That involves God's power through our tongue, not the mere gift of gab. Our service should depend on God's strength. That reminds me of our tech team, whose members I think have logged seventeen combined hours of sleep over the past four months. Their monumental ministry relies on God's strength, not their own.

Spiritual gifts entail spiritual enablement. Without God's power, our service is in our own strength.

Serving in our own strength rather than God's is like pushing a car rather than driving it.

In our own strength, we are also less prone to take divinely inspired risks. We play it safe, because we forget God is the One working through us. J. Oswald Sanders states, "A great deal more failure is the result of an excess of caution than of bold experimentation with ideas. The frontiers of the kingdom of God were never advanced by men and women of caution."

Let's serve boldly and with the understanding that we get to be like those diamonds mentioned last week. We each reflect a different facet of God's varied grace. In this way, God is glorified through Christ in us!

Keep Going

Charles Swindoll writes about Ignace Jan Paderewski, the famous pianist, who was scheduled to perform at a great concert hall in America. It was a high-society extravaganza. Present in the audience that evening was a mother and her fidgety nine-year old. She had brought him in the hopes that when he heard the great composer play, he would be encouraged to practice.

As the mother turned to talk with some friends, he slipped away and was strangely drawn to the grand Steinway piano on the platform. Staring wide-eyed at the keys the boy sat on the stool, placed his small fingers on the keys and began to play "Chopsticks." The roar of the crowd came to a hush as frowning faces pointed in his direction. Someone began to shout, "Get that boy away from there!" "Where is his mother?" Somebody get that kid."

Backstage the master composer overheard the sounds out front. He quickly realized what was happening and hurried toward the stage. Without one word of announcement, he stooped over behind the boy, reached around on both sides, and began to improvise a countermelody to harmonize with and enhance "Chopsticks." As they played together, the composer kept whispering in the boy's ear, "Keep going; don't quit. Keep playing; don't stop. Don't quit...."

It is the same for us as we work for the Lord. Our playing of "Chopsticks" may not be impressing anyone. But about the time we're ready to give up, we hear the Master say, "Keep going; don't stop; don't give up."

This is God's message to us. "Don't give up. It doesn't matter what others think about what you're doing. Do it with all your heart unto Me and I'll help you."

[i] <https://didyouknowfacts.com/14-comparisons-mess-perception-history-time/>

[ii] <https://www.rd.com/list/facts-warp-perception-time/>