

Stewards of Grace

I Peter 4: 7-11

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**All Saints Sunday, Nov 6, AD 2022
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Our Scripture begins with poignant urgency, “The end of all things is at hand.” Surely Peter got this line from J.R.R. Tolkien! ☺ (That is how it works, right?). It’s a dream come true for me to make a connection with one of Tolkien’s most moving scenes.



The one Ring has been destroyed. The evil one’s power has been broken, and his realm is heaving. Mt. Doom is erupting. An exhausted Sam and Frodo sit on the broken rock as lava swirls around them. They have succeeded in their quest, but have no hope of getting home. Frodo says to his friend, “I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam.” Here at the end of all things, Frodo finds comfort in the loyalty and companionship of Sam. *I am glad you are here with me, here at the end of all things.* It just rends your heart. Thankfully, it wasn’t actually the end of all things. Frodo and Sam would be rescued by eagles. Middle Earth would be renewed. A new day would dawn.

So when is the end of all things? Certainly Peter has in mind the return of Jesus Christ. On the day of judgment, this world will be called to a halt and every knee will bow. Evil will not go on forever. Jesus reigns. But even then, that’s not the end, but another beginning. The new heavens and the new earth will descend. Humanity will flourish again.

The end of all things occurs in our experience many times before the final end. More often we say something like, “That’s the end of life as we know it.” Nothing will ever be the same. You don’t get into the college you planned to attend since you were 6. You fail at your dream job and don’t know what you will do next. You start a business and the economy crashes. Even worse, the car crashes. The end of all things comes when parents lose a child. Or when a spouse walks out of the house and into the arms of someone else. It’s the end of the world as we know it. And it feels like it’s the end of all things. Nothing else seems to matter very much anymore.

I remember talking with a friend about the perils of relationships that actually matter to your heart and soul. We concluded with this thought: everything is always at risk. Changes upset the equilibrium. Obstacles get thrown in your path. The river of life sweeps us downstream. The end of all things always presses in.

That word we translate as “the end,” doesn’t just mean conclusion. It has to do with purpose. Today we may ask someone, “So what’s your end-game?” We mean to ask what someone hopes to get out of what they’re doing. What are you shooting for? Each of us is living for something. Every second. Even if you think you’re not, you are. If you’re just drifting, you have a purpose—even if it’s just to stay safe from the risk of committing to something. Every second our reason for being presses in on each of us. The question of the purpose of all things ever presses us.

So Peter gives some direct advice. The end of all things is at hand. Therefore, be self-controlled and sober-minded. Every second you are accountable for your life, so pay attention. Every moment, your end could come, so be intentional. Every hour, let your thoughts and actions lead toward the true purpose of your life. Think about it:

- You don’t want to be hyper-extended financially when the market dives.
- You don’t want to be sleeping in your chair in an oxy haze with an empty vodka bottle next to you the day the son you haven’t heard from in months finally calls.
- You don’t want to be caught unreconciled with a family member the night the heart attack occurs.
- You don’t want to be holding a bag stubbornly marked, “But I’m right!” as you spend your twilight years more and more alone with your pride.
- You don’t want to be caught in mob panic when a natural disaster occurs, or in mob justice when the rage of group-think turns viciously on someone.
- You don’t want to be hunkered down in a Christian bunker convinced Jesus is coming this afternoon when he has specifically sent you into the world in mission.

Therefore, be self-controlled and sober-minded. Then Peter adds, “for the sake of your prayers.” Unchecked addictions become functioning gods in our lives, and that blocks us from the living God. Nothing poisons your connection to God like unforgiveness. Nothing muffles the awareness of God’s presence like refusing to

reflect, flitting from one distraction to another. For the sake of your prayers, be self-controlled and sober-minded, sticking close to your purpose, the true end goal of your life.

Next, Peter turns us to a beautifully famous sentence. “Above all, love one another earnestly from the heart. For love covers a multitude of sins.” Love covers a multitude of sins. I thought this week about being 13 or 14 years old. I had reached that unattractive point where everything my parents did drove me crazy. I remember sitting at the breakfast table disgusted at the way my parents chewed their toast. Just gross. But later that day at school, my desk was next to a girl who was intoxicatingly beautiful. I dared not look straight at her. But she was chewing gum, popping it, and it was the sweetest sound I’d ever heard! Love was covering a multitude of sins. But that may not be what Peter had in mind.

So we think a bit of the contrasts.

- Legalism always finds faults in the name of rightness. Legalism ruins relationships on the grounds of technical fouls.
- Being a tight wad all the time chokes the people who love you, sucking the joy out of everything they do. Being cheap, penurious, means living from a scarcity mentality. You never feel like you have enough, and you end up emptier than you could ever imagine.
- Not dealing with issues because you fear conflict pushes everything down in a fake pleasantness that isn’t love. It ends up exploding and doing damage. Or in just living for years in a dysfunctional pattern.
- Meanness and bitterness cause everyone around you to walk on eggshells. That is, if they can’t find a way to avoid you all together. Never giving anyone the benefit of the doubt leaves people miserable, and you alone feeding on gall.

But love, earnest, reaching, intentional love covers a multitude of sins. Not because sins aren’t recognized. They are noticed and named. And then forgiven. The word there for such earnest love has to do with stretching a rope to its full length. It’s the opposite of shrinking back, or looking for someone better to be with. Such love reaches with affection. One of the most striking qualities of Jesus was how the worst sinners were the most attracted to him. Scoundrels flocked to Jesus. Not because he overlooked their wrongs. Never. But he loved them beyond those flaws. His love was a magnet and that kind of love transforms better than a million lectures.

That's the kind of Christian community we are called to become. Engaged with one another. Heart to heart. Life on life. It's a beautiful thing to behold. Our church ministered to the entire community this past week after a teenager had died. We strode into tears, not away from them. But we waded in with open arms and the hope of the gospel. It's what I see you do over and over. And it's just what Peter encouraged his readers to do. "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."

Back in chapter 2, Peter described the church as living stones, joined together into a house of God. Now he uses the picture of a household manager. A large family house in those days was a miniature industry. There were family members, servants, workers, animals and fields. The house generated crops and livestock, income and community life. It helped everyone flourish. A steward, or house manager, would be someone helping to keep everything running. He'd make sure the right people were in the right places to get the work done. So Peter empowers every believer to discover that we have something to contribute to the good of the whole. Every one of us has received a gift of grace from God. It's not for our egos or to feather our nests. It's for serving the household of God. Everybody matters. Everybody is needed.

In some of Paul's letters, the list of these spiritual gifts gets fairly long. Here, Peter just gives two categories: speaking and serving. Words and deeds. We encourage and bless one another with words. This could be Ryan Dickerson teaching Ephesians in Sunday school, or an adult putting an arm around a child and telling him what a great guy he is. It could be a sermon or it could be financial analysis of our church budget. It could be counselling or taking communion to the homebound. However we speak as a way of serving, Peter encourages us to invite God to be speaking through us.

We also encourage and bless one another with actions of service. This could be taking a meal to someone or setting up chairs. It could be your work at hospice or mentoring a student. It could be stuffing envelopes or changing the oil. However we serve, Peter encourages us to draw from the strength God supplies. Stewarding the graces in service to the household of faith is part of loving one another earnestly from the heart.

So this is the Sunday where I use part of a sermon to remind us that stewardship includes giving financially. We don't talk about this a lot. We talk about Jesus and serve him in the church and community. That leads to people's giving. But once a year, it's important to be intentional about the grace of giving.

A couple years ago, I heard a former headmaster of the Dunham School give some advice to the current board. He said, “People don’t give to the needs of institutions. They give to solutions. They are not moved by how desperately you need money. They want to know what you are doing to solve things that matter to them. People give to solutions.” I tucked that away. It seems a really important principle. I suppose we could show you pictures of Darin’s five children, standing shoeless in tattered clothes and say, “Please, take care of this pastor!” Or maybe an ultrasound of Colton and Rachel’s soon to arrive baby. But that’s not why we’re here or why we steward the grace of God that has come to us financially.

I’m willing to dare to invite you to ask the question, “Does your church offer solutions to what matters most? Do you hear the gospel of Jesus Christ? Is that gospel clearly connected to your life and your deepest needs? Do we love children and teach them God’s Word in a context of encouragement? Do we love our city and reach out to our community in ways that offer long term transformation? Do we foster a culture of loving one another earnestly from the heart? Is this a place you turn to in sorrow and in joy, at births, baptisms, confirmations, weddings, divorces, cancers, funerals and all of life in-between?” If not, I can’t imagine why you would give to God through your church. But if it’s true that God’s solutions are put forth in this household of faith, I can’t imagine how anyone would not want to contribute to the daily upkeep and the advancing mission.

It takes all of us to maintain this household and to expand it. Every gift matters. And you know my philosophy of giving: I want every person to feel, whether they give one dollar or a hundred thousand, “I’m in that. I’m in everything my church does.” It’s enormously helpful when we turn in estimates of giving, and even more helpful when we do it sooner rather than later. It will be challenging and necessary for us not to reduce our gifts in this weird economy, but to see if we can’t advance them. I know the Dawson’s will have to cut out a few things amidst inflation in order to increase our pledge, but we’ll do it. Because we are all in with you.

The end of all things is always drawing near. The purpose and meaning of your life is always pressing you to be more intentional and more focused. We’re called to love one another earnestly from the heart. You’re doing it. That’s why we can show up here some Sundays ragged and torn from the strife of life and discover anew: love covers a multitude of sins.