



Part 8 - The Church's Love

1 Peter 4:7-8

In the middle ages it was common to hear of the four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, hope, and temperance. Certainly those are good things with strong biblical justification. Borrowing from the Apostle Paul the church of the middle ages often referred to the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. In his first epistle, the Apostle Peter offers a description of the Christian life in just a few words. It is a

description which ought to capture our will and imagination.

What did the great apostle call the church to be? What was for him the authentic Christian life? What mattered most to this man who was taught the Christian life by the Lord Jesus himself, both by word and by an example? Peter had been privileged to observe the Lord Jesus daily for upwards of three years. He was there when Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist and began washing his disciple's feet. He witnessed Jesus' personal holiness, his patience with sinners, and his righteous zeal for the glory of God. Peter had witnessed Jesus offer himself up to the hands of sinful men to be crucified. This man who experienced the powerful indwelling of the Holy Spirit in a way unique to an apostle – What was most important to him?

The Apostle Peter calls the church – those he refers to as “elect exiles” (**1 Peter 1:1**) – to “above all keep loving one another earnestly” (**1 Peter 4:8**). This earnest love, Peter writes, is an urgent thing. It is to be lived with “the end of all things” in mind (**1 Peter 4:7**). This is not a worldly, self-seeking, sentimental, indulgent sort of love. The church is called to a distinctively Christian love. It is a love which operates by the standards of God's truth. It is a holy love. It is a love which seeks to serve and is invested in the good of the other. The church's love revels in righteousness and truth but is quick to show mercy. Most of all, it is a love which is grounded in the love of Christ who laid down his life so that we might live.

1. The church's love is Christian

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you. (**1 Peter 1:1-2**)

- It must be kept in mind that Peter is writing to the church. His immediate audience were churches throughout Asia Minor. His words in chapter four, therefore, are not about love in some general sense to non-descript readers. Rather, the apostle is commending uniquely Christian love to fellow Christians. The church does not simply seek to appropriate the world's ideas about love. The church does not share the world's ideas concerning love. The Church's love is uniquely Christian because it is defined and modeled by God through the Person and work of Jesus.
- Love that is Christian is love that values the truth of God's Word. The world's love hates the word of God. Love that is Christian does not revel in what is untrue, unrighteous, or unjust. Worldly love is often defined by the emotional, sensual, and circumstantial. Love that is Christian is not flimsy. It is tough. It hangs in there. It's not something you fall into but something you choose. Love that is Christian is not self-indulgent. It does not seek to satisfy itself. It will not manipulate.
- These are the ways in which God has loved us. Because God is love and does not merely do loving things, his love is not temporary nor can it be diminished. Because God's love is perfect and holy he will never act in ways which are contrary to what is right and good and true and just. God's love is never manipulative but is giving to the point of sacrifice: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life” (**John 3:16**).

2. The church's love is urgent

Vv. 7-8 – “The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all keep loving one another earnestly.”

- Like Jesus, the apostles called the people regularly to live in light of the end of the age. This is not a call to try to discern the exact timing of the Lord's return. What is so remarkable is not the call to live in light of the Lord's return. The remarkable thing is Peter's prescription for the appropriate response to such urgency. Not surprisingly he calls for self-control and sobriety as he does elsewhere in the letter. But it is the “above all” of verse 8 which ought to surprise. In light of the “end of all things” the church must love one another “above all.”
- In our own lifetime we have been witness to various cults and Christian sects respond to end-times predictions with various degrees of insanity, violence, and selfishness. People have fled to the wilderness, committed suicide, robed banks, and poisoned people in subways in response to their belief that judgment day was upon us. The church is not to respond to the coming judgment by retreat or violence or self-protection. Rather, the church is to, “above all keep loving one another earnestly.”
- The adjective translated “earnestly,” implies a steadfast intent. It “speaks not so much of emotional intensity but is, in this context, a love that persists despite difficulties because it is a love that also ‘covers a multitude of sins.’”¹

3. The church's love is sacrificial

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

- The apostle tells us that the love of Christians “covers a multitude of sins.” For sins to be covered requires repentance and forgiveness. It requires patience and longsuffering. So, to love means that we will forgive our fellow sinners just as we have been forgiven by God. In this way we “cover” the sins of our brothers and sisters. In this sense, the apostle is not speaking in theological terms about sins being forgiven as though we somehow atone for the sins of others. He speaking to that unique character of Christian love which bears with and endures the sins of brothers and sisters.
- The clause “covers a multitude of sins” may come from **Proverbs 10:12** (cf. **James 5:20**) of which Peter would certainly have been familiar. In that context, the reality that love “covers” is juxtaposed with “Hatred stirs up dissension” (Proverbs 10:12a). The rest of that verse reads: “...but love covers all wrongs.” Just as hatred is contrasted against love, so too is “stirring up dissension” opposed to “covers all wrongs.” It is likely that “the love that covers sins is probably best understood as forbearance that does not let wrongs done within the Christian community come to their fullest and most virulent expression.”²
- The church's love covers over a multitude of sins in various ways depending upon the severity of the sin. In many cases a personal offense can be graciously endured. In this way the church's love “bears all things...endures all things” (**1 Corinthians 13:7**). Some sins within the church however must be addressed formally because of the relative damage that is done by certain sins. The Lord Jesus and the apostles gave the church the authority and responsibility to discipline its erring members in the cases of particularly grievous sins (**Matthew 18:15-18**; **1 Corinthians 5**). The hope is that the erring brother or sister will repent in which case their sin will be “covered.”
- Living in Christian community with fellow saved sinners will give us plenty of opportunities to deal with sin (our own as well as that of others). And so we must resist responding to sin in ways that destroy community. The requirements of earnest love are stated in **1 Peter 2:1**: “So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.” Later in **3:9** Peter requires that blessing be returned for insult. Love promotes unity and puts to death those behaviors which tear at the fabric of our union with one another through Christ.
- While we cannot atone for the sins of our brothers and sisters, we are able to “cover over a multitude of sins” because Jesus Christ died and was raised that our sins would be truly covered. Our longsuffering with one another; our patience with each other's sins only makes sense in light of Christ's death on our behalf. We can cover over one another's sins only because Jesus bore our sin and guilt on the cross and swept them away into the ocean of his gracious forgetfulness.

¹ Karen Jobes, *1 Peter* (BECNT), pg. 278.

² Ibid