

Introduction

While there is some dispute over the authorship of this epistle, what is clear is that it was written to encourage believers who were living in a time and culture that was hostile to Christianity. There are references to suffering and persecution. In addition, there is a very clear sense that the risen Christ's return is imminent! And that, friends, is motivation to endure and persevere in adversity as well as a strong motivation to share the good news with others so that they too may benefit from a relationship with the Savior!

1 Peter 4:7-11 New Living Translation (NLT)

⁷ The end of the world is coming soon. Therefore, be earnest and disciplined in your prayers. ⁸ Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹ Cheerfully share your home with those who need a meal or a place to stay.

¹⁰ God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. ¹¹ Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen.

PRAY

In 1988 the Nike Corporation began its marketing slogan: Just Do It!

Given that their products are marketed to and used predominantly by athletes, I suppose that their emphasis was on assisting athletes in accomplishing "peak performance" in their sport. Hence, "Just do it!"

If we were to apply this slogan to discipleship, Peter might say: "Just pray! Just love! Just serve! Just do it!"

I think that makes me tired. "Just do it!" puts all the responsibility on me, even if I am wearing a pair of Nike Air Max 270's that cost \$200!

You see, if it's all on me, we're doomed. But Christianity is about teamwork.

The Good News is this: We're all in this together! Each and every one of us—and yes that means you and you and you—are essential and necessary to the accomplishment of the mission God has for Calvary!

But let's listen and learn from Peter. When a family or a group is suffering trials or persecution, it seems that one of two things will result: either the people will pull together and weather the storm OR the pressure and stress of it will fracture the family or pull group apart. The same can happen with churches.

Peter is writing to encourage the church to glorify God, who will help them persevere! Peter is quite certain that "the end of all things is near" because it was commonly believed that Christ would return during the lifetime of the original disciples.

Clearly that has not yet happened. We are now 2000 years down the road, and counting. That said, each of us is another day closer to our own “end”. We might wonder, why the delay? What is God waiting for? Elsewhere Peter writes:

⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:8-10 (NIV)

Will we be ready for Christ’s return? And equally important, will our families, our friends and neighbors be ready too?

Some years ago Queen Elizabeth of England visited Chicago. You can imagine the preparations that were made in order to provide a “red carpet” welcome for the Queen. Numerous hotels were contacted in advance. When the manager of the Drake Hotel was contacted, this was his reply: “We are making no special plans for the Queen; we are always ready for royalty!”
(I want to stay at the Drake Hotel!!)

What might we do to help others be ready for Christ’s return and to glorify God in the meantime?

According to Peter, there are four things we must do:

First, pray. How many of you can pray? If you can talk to a friend, you can talk to God, who is also our friend. It really is that easy. No fancy formula, no special words required. Just tell the Lord what or who is on your mind. Did you know you have an unseen prayer partner? Paul tells us (Romans 8:26) that “the Spirit helps us when we do not know how to pray, interceding for us with groans too deep for words”.

Above all, Peter says we should be earnest and disciplined in prayer. Be alert, stay awake. Exercise sound judgement. Be “sober”, clear minded, focused, self-controlled.

If you recall, in Tom Rainer’s book, Autopsy of a Deceased Church, he wrote that churches that failed to pray together, failed. It didn’t happen overnight, it was a process of slow erosion. Prayer is the “glue” that holds us together, not only with one another, but also with God and with God’s purposes. **Prayer is essential. Crucial. Without prayer, we are without hope. Prayer is something everyone can and need do on a daily basis!**

First, we are to pray.

Second, we are to love.

Love is central to Christian life and discipleship (I John 4:20). “We love, because God first loved us.” When asked, Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39). Furthermore, **how we love others** is a distinguishing mark of those who know Jesus (John 13:34-35). In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul says that without love, anything else we may do is worthless and will amount to less than a hill of beans (I Corinthians 13:1-3)!

Here Peter places a priority on practicing love. Here he uses a word for love that is not primarily a feeling or emotion, but love is something one does, it involves action. Especially when we are under stress or pressure, it is normal to take out our frustration on those closest to us. (Does this sound familiar?)

This may explain why Peter uses the following expression: “Keep fervent in your love for one another.” “Fervent” means literally “to stretch” or “strain”. It was used of an athlete stretching and straining every muscle toward the end of the race. As we see the Lord’s coming drawing near, we should exert every effort to love one another. That is implicit in the phrase, “Love covers a multitude of sins.” (Stephen J. Cole)

Let’s get real for a moment, shall we? Is it easy to love others? Perhaps it is easier to love those who love us. *Peter commands us to love people that we may not like! That radical, Jesus, went so far as to command us to love our enemies!* (This takes on profound meaning in light of current events—the mailing of pipe bombs to “enemies”, and the shooting down of Jews worshipping in their synagogue.)

The reality is that we will not be best friends with everyone. That’s ok. There are people who, due to differences in personality, temperament, or whatever, are those with whom we just don’t see eye to eye, even if all are believers. That is not sinful, that is just the reality of living in a sinful world with other sinners. Still, we are to love others with God’s love.

It’s probably safe to assume that all of us have a “sandpaper person” or two in our lives—you know—a person who rubs us the wrong way. So why would God allow “sandpaper people” in our lives?? I’m guessing it is because those folks give us the opportunity to grow spiritually and exercise the fruits of the Spirit—yes, that’s right...fruits of the Spirit such as love, patience, forbearance.

And if the purpose of sandpaper is to smooth rough edges, could it possibly be that rubbing up against these relationships, some of our own rough edges can become smoother? I think this is in part, what Peter is getting at with this expression, “love covers a multitude of sins”.

Another way to think about this: “EGR”. What, you ask, is “EGR”? One time I was describing a “sandpaper person” to my sister. (Ok. If I’m honest, I was grumbling or complaining about this person!) She listened. Then she said to me, “That person is ‘EGR’.”

“What?? ‘EGR’?”

“Extra Grace Required—EGR!”

At one time or another, *all of us* need/require “extra grace”! Why?

Because we are broken people living in a broken world. That is what Peter is getting at here. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.”

Of course, the ultimate “covering” of ‘a multitude of sin’, was accomplished on the cross. If we accept Christ, and receive God’s redeeming love, God sees us “in Christ”, and therefore our sin is covered up. When God sees us, God no longer sees our sin, but sees us “in Christ”.

As disciples who are going to **“Just do it”, we are to first, pray. Second, love even/especially those who are hard to love.**

Third, we are to practice hospitality. Our love is to extend to strangers—those we do not yet know. That is in fact, the meaning of the Greek word used here for “hospitable”—“love of strangers”. Furthermore, this generous welcome is to be offered without grumbling or complaint! Perhaps the only way to truly do that is to see in the face of our unexpected visitor, the newcomer, or the stranger—the face of Christ.

Jesus himself tells such a story as it relates to judgment day, Matthew 25. Those who will be rewarded will be those who—un-self-consciously--treated a stranger as if he/she is Jesus:

³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

Fourth and Finally, we are to serve! We are to put to use our spiritual gift!

A few weeks ago I showed you my lovely birthday gift, from my fabulous sister: a Fitbit. My birthday was in March and this gift has been sitting, waiting patiently in its box! Waiting. Waiting for me to put it to use. In order to do that I had to go online and download an app. (What is an app?!) Then and only then, could the device be activated. Then it was finally able to do what it was made to do. It could fulfill its purpose! It’s a process!

God created you. God made you and gave you a gift. Don’t keep it under wraps. Unwrap it! Discover it! Activate it! Utilize it for the good of the body and for the community. Fulfill your God-given purpose!

Last week and today copies of our Community Leader Survey are available. Take them home. Pray over them. Look at page 10 in today’s bulletin, and last week’s. God is calling each one of us to engage in our community. What that will look like will be different for each one of us.

Many of you are already actively serving—in our music ministry, in teaching, in leadership as elders and deacons and more. Some of you are saying to yourself: “I’ve been there, done that.” “I’m slowing down.” “I’m not up to doing as much as I once did.”

Some of you may not be aware of opportunities and ways you might serve. Some of you are employed, so your time to “serve” is limited. You are still God’s person on the job.

Some of you may say, “I have little to offer.”

Really? In the passage Tom read for us from John’s gospel we heard about someone who offered what they had: five pieces of bread and two fish. It was so little to offer. But it was everything. And you know the rest of the story: Five thousand men PLUS women and children ate their fill and there were lots of leftovers!

The point? In God's economy, nothing is wasted! Whatever gift we have received, we are to share it with others. And we do so, relying on God who will supply the strength and energy we need.

Our motive to pray, love, be hospitable and serve others is to give glory to God. The glory of God is the only motive that will allow us to persevere in service without burning out.

Are you and I living in a way that others see how great God truly is?

Are you and I praying, loving, serving others with the gifts God has given us?

The king is coming—sooner than we think—will we be ready to welcome royalty?

Pray with me. Gracious God: We stand in awe, that you would give us gifts, and that you would use us to accomplish your eternal purposes in this world. May we offer whatever we have to you, be it little or much, knowing that nothing is wasted in your economy. It is so hard to truly love people...those sandpaper people, not to mention those we might perceive as enemies—yet you challenge us to pray, love, welcome and serve them. By the work of your Spirit, may it be so! Make us like Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen!