*Doing Spiritual Good to One Another*

1 Peter 4:7-11

4/2/23

Several years ago, I came across a phrase in a book that has stuck with me. The author defined discipleship as *doing* *spiritual good to someone.* The whole premise of the book was that Christians should seek to help each other grow in their relationship with God, His people, and in effective service. The idea of doing spiritual good to one another provides a good summation of the verses in front of us.

We left off our study by considering the Christian’s desire to live for the will of God. The verses I just read contain four commands that expand on what it means to do this. Three of the commands speak directly to our lives together as followers of Jesus Christ; and the fourth command addresses this theme implicitly. So, the paragraph focuses on how the gospel shapes our involvement in the local church. The local church sits at the center of God’s plans and purposes in the world. We are saved into a community of faith and made individual members of the body of Christ. Thus, a Christian’s desire is to do the will of God themselves and to help others to do the same. We are to seek to do spiritual good to one another.

Originally, I intended deal with all four commands at once, but as I prepped for today, I realized that it would take longer to consider these things well than time would allow for. So, we will look at the first two commands today and the other two commands after Easter.

The first command can be summarized as *keep your wits about you.* Vs. 7 opens with the phrase *the end of all things is near.* A truth that was not immediately clear to many in Jesus’ day was that there would be two appearances of the Messiah, the first to secure salvation and the second to establish His Davidic reign on earth. This is one of the reasons Jesus’ disciples struggled to grasp His statements on suffering and death. When Jesus returned to heaven, they expected His immediate return. In fact, John had to address a rumor that he would not die before Jesus returned in Jn. 21:23. This was a somewhat natural response to some of Jesus’ comments. The NT teaches us to long for and anticipate His return. Our awareness of these truths tends to heighten in times of suffering. Peter’s original readers were suffering. By reminding them that the end is near, he is pointing them to two realities: 1) that their suffering it temporal, and 2) Christ’s return will put everything right. He wants them to see their circumstances through the lens of eternity.

Because the end of all things is near, believers are to *be of sound mind and sober spirit*. Some translations say *soberminded*, which I prefer. Both commands communicate the same thing. In contrast to the drunkenness, carousing, and debased parties we are to avoid in vs. 3, the Christian is to be clear minded. Faithful living starts with truth. Peter is telling us to keep our wits about us so that the passing pleasures of the world, the sinful desires of our flesh, or our emotional fragility do not determine our actions. Instead, the truths of God should control us. We are to *arm ourselves for this purpose* by filling our minds with truth, which is our guide.

We find a similar exhortation in Titus. In that letter, Paul repeatedly tells believers to be sensible. This means that the believer’s mind is engaged so that their knowledge governs their actions. This is what it means to have a Christian worldview. The Bible informs how we see the world and how we act in it. We should filter everything through the lens of God’s revealed will. This requires sound judgment, first to know what God’s word says and then to know how it applies to our circumstances. It also requires a sober mind. Christians should take a serious approach to life. That does not mean we are joyless or miserable; but it does mean that we sense the gravity of eternity, which causes us to live today for that day.

The text say we are to keep our wits about us *for the purpose of prayer*. We saw this principle in 3:7, where Peter connected a husband’s attitude towards his wife with the effectiveness of his prayer life. Spiritual weakness in one area effects the spiritual vitality of other aspects of our lives. When we approach life in a worldly-minded or casual way, our prayers will reflect the thinking of the world rather than the will of God. But when we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, our prayers will focus on the will of God. The Scriptures tell us that, *this is the confidence which we have before [God], that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him* (1 Jn. 5:14-15)*.*

As we keep our wits about us, seeing life through the lens of God’s word, it will compel us to pray. Prayer is two-fold in nature. First, there is private prayer, where we seek to be alone with God to pour out our souls, seek His face, confess our sins, express our adoration, ask His direction, and so on. Prayer and the study of God’s word, which are not separate disciplines, but are practices best done simultaneously, are the things that, more than anything else, cultivate intimacy with God.

There is a second aspect to prayer that is often neglected. It is the practice of corporate prayer. When you read the NT, you find constant appeal for believers to pray together. In Acts 1 we read how Jesus’ followers spent the time between Jesus’ ascension and the arrival of the Spirit continually devoted to prayer. Acts 2, we are told that the church continually devoted themselves to prayer (2:42). In Acts 4, the church responded to persecution by praying. In Acts 12, Peter is arrested. The church’s response was to gather and pray. God answered their prayers by miraculously saving Peter. In Acts 13, it is as the leaders of the church at Antioch prayed together that God told them to send Paul and Barnabas out as church planters. I could give many more examples of the role corporate prayer had in the life of the early church. God does extraordinary things through the ordinary means of prayer and the preaching of His word.

Prayer takes effort. It takes intentionality and discipline to establish and maintain the practice of prayer. What place does prayer have in your life? Do you spend intentional time in private prayer? Are you regularly gathering with people for the purpose of corporate prayer? If not, what could you change to see growth in this vital area of your spiritual life?

So, the first command is to keep our wits about us. The second command is to love one another fervently. This command is introduced with the words *above all*, reminding us that the command to love supersedes every other command in the Bible. All of God’s commands fit under the two headings of love God and love people. So, it is no surprise that Peter would say that loving one another is the supreme command when it comes to our life together as God’s people.

Twice on the night of His arrest, Jesus commanded His disciples to love one another. In Jn. 13:34-35, we read *a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.* Then in 15:12-13, Jesus again says *This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.* Jesus is saying two things. 1) we are to love one another; 2) He shows us what love looks like.

Now, I find there to be some confusion on what it means to love one another, for the world has a different definition of love than the Bible. In our culture, loving someone means affirming their choices and supporting whatever makes them happy. If we fail to do so, we are considered unloving. People do the same thing to God, saying that if He really is a God of love, then He will never condemn people to hell. He will only forgive and do what we want. Yet that is not how God operates. He is the perfect embodiment of love, even if the world does not see it. So we need to think carefully what the Bible means by love.

We tend to think of love primarily as an emotion. Although our emotions should play into it, they are not the real substance of love. The word for love here is *agape*, which is the NT’s term for God’s covenant making and covenant keeping love. God’s love is unconditional, meaning it is not His emotional response to our behavior. It is a predetermined love bestowed on His people that will never be taken away. It is a love that says *I am committed to you as a person, no matter what.*

Agape love is best expressed through a covenant. At a wedding, we witness a bride and groom exchanging vows to love, honor, and cherish each other no matter what happens in life. In our text, Peter says *above all, make this love commitment to the church*. Historically Protestants have expressed this commitment through church covenants that identify the core commitments the NT says we are to make to the church. When someone joins the church, they are expressing an unconditional love-commitment to that local church to be and do what God commands us to be and do in one another’s lives.

Now this does not mean emotions are irrelevant to the fullest expression of love. God’s deep seated love for us is what compelled Him to send His Son to be our Savior. Jesus expressed His love for us by laying down His life. He did not do it from a dogged *I must do this* attitude. He did it *for the joy set before Him.* His commitment to us caused Him to joyfully lay down His life that we might gain life. In the fullest expressions of love, we keep our covenant commitment to one another from a joyful heart. When both people in a marriage covenant keep their unconditional commitments to the other, the bond of their love deepens and strengthens with time. So it is in the church. As we express covenant love towards one another, our love will grow to the glory of God and comfort of His people.

It is important for us to see how Peter expresses this command. The command to *keep fervent* reminds us that covenant keeping love does not happen by chance. It requires effort. Loving the church is a choice. We can do things that stimulate our love, and we can do things that cause it to grow cold. In the same way a spouse, through neglect of their covenant vows, can fall out of love with their mate, a believer, through neglect can fall out of love with the church. When Peter tells us to *keep fervent in our love for one another,* he is telling us to do the things that keep our love for God’s people vibrant. What are those things that keep our love fervent? Being together. Serving one another. Speaking God’s truth to one another, primarily to build up but also to correct when necessary. Ultimately, anything that falls under the banner of doing spiritual good to one another will cultivate fervent love. It begins with a commitment to God and His people that informs how we act towards one another.

We are to love like this because love covers a multitude of sins. This is where we need to think carefully, for love never ignores sin. Instead, it deals with sin. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to judge that world, but that the world might be saved through Him.* Jesus expressed God’s love by laying down His life to deal with our sin problem, reconciling us to God. God’s love does not tolerate sin, but rather seeks to deal with it. That was the reason for Jesus’ death on the cross. And it is the reason God disciplines us after salvation, so that we might learn obedience as beloved sons and daughters (Heb. 12:4-11).

Love covers a multitude of sins in the church. That means love compels to support one another in our battle against sin. Love calls us to gently correct when sin gains the upper hand in someone’s life. Love compels us to be patient as people struggle and to let go of offenses. Rather than throwing in the towel on relationship with someone because we have been hurt by them, we remain committed to their spiritual well-being. It means we are willing to climb down into the mud with someone, not to wallow in their misery, but to help carry them to victory. I know church life can messy. There is no Christian who has spent substantial time sacrificially serving the church who does not have some wounds and scars caused by other Christians. But their love for God and His people keeps their covenant love alive and vibrant.

I know a woman who had a stroke a few years back that greatly affected her memory. Her husband told me that she asked him every day if they were going to church. For her entire life, her weekly rhythm was defined by life in the local church. Her love for God’s people remained fervent even after her physical and mental capacities had faltered. To me, that is what it means to keep fervent in your love for one another.

The church is our family, our people with whom we should feel most at home. We are to love one another with a 1 Corinthians 13 kind of love. 1 Corinthians 13 teaches a local church how to love one another with an agape kind of love. I challenge each of us, me included, to find time today, to get alone with God, and open our bibles to 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, and prayerfully ask God to show us if we are expressing this kind of love towards the other members of our church family. If God shows you a deficiency in your love, then ask Him to grow your love for His people in that area, for that is the kind of prayer God delights to answer.

*Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.*