

The Heart That Loves Ministry

1 Peter 4:7-11

Tonight we are going to take a step back from the foundations and emphasis of the different ministries here at the Chapel and instead examine our heart motivations for serving in ministry. The question we'll be exploring is what do the scriptures tell us a heart that loves God and others in ministry should look like? Before we begin I want to give a word of caution. All challenges and exhortations about serving in ministry can be turned into some form of legalistic obligation; we make it our work instead of God's work in and through us. In ministry as any other area of our Christian life we are dependent on God's grace to take us out of ourselves and into the life and service of others. A heart that loves ministry is God's work in us so that He alone will be glorified.

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, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: 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.

To begin to understand God's intention in this text as it applies to our ministries here at the Chapel we must first have an understanding of Peter's intention in writing to his original audience.

Peter was writing to the churches in Asia Minor made up mostly of gentile believers. There is an overarching theme of suffering for righteousness sake for God's glory that he weaves throughout his letter.

Peter explains that there is a threefold purpose in their suffering in Chapter 1.

- It is to instill steadfastness in their faith. Because they have a living hope and imperishable inheritance through the resurrection of Christ. (1Pet 1:1-6)
- It is for their increase in holiness. They are no longer to conform themselves to their previous way of life, living without God and indulging in self-focused and sinful passions. (1Pet 1:3-16)
- It is so they will love one another earnestly. Having been purified by obedience to the truth of the gospel they are now enabled to sincerely love one another from a pure heart. (1Pet 1:22-23)

The reality of suffering for the sake of the gospel doesn't grip us like it did Peter's original audience. We live with the hope that our country's fading veneer of Christian culture will keep that sort of suffering at bay. The truth is we are now living in a very pagan and increasingly hostile culture, with all the same enticements to sinful idolatry that the first century church encountered only magnified and accessible 24/7 because of technology. We shouldn't deceive ourselves; scripture teaches that we are going to suffer both as a consequence of the fallenness of this world and because of the sins of unbelievers and believers alike.

As we unpack these few short verses I want us to see that in the midst of difficulties, trials and sin the reality of God's love and his glory is manifested in our loving and serving one another here at the Chapel.

Ministry's Eschatological Motivation V.7

Peter begins chapter 4 by stating that because Christ suffered for sin in our place we are to arm ourselves with the same mind. We must no longer conform ourselves to the lusts and idols of our life before Christ. And this is not a call to mere imitation of Christ but is the gospel reality of what his Spirit is doing to conform us to his image by his death and resurrection. The time for living as we once did as unbelievers is now in the past. Having a firm grasp of these two categories of time before and after our salvation will transform our thinking about serving and loving one another.

Verse 7 begins with a declaration of a third category of time that we must always have set squarely before us.

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

Peter is moving the focus of the suffering church from the viewpoint of time as it relates to their salvation to a view of Christ's Second Coming. This is the eschatological motivation for serious and prayerful Christian life and duty. It is not just the chronological end of things but also the consummation, the fulfillment of God's Kingdom that is to be anticipated and lived for expectantly.

We are to be a people who are self-controlled and sober-minded because Christ is going to return. Do we get up each morning and live in that reality? Or do we go through our day without it ever crossing our mind. Peter on the other hand was expectant of His Lord's return and he exhorted his readers that they were to be alert and not to be lulled into a careless self-satisfied life or let the trials of living in this fallen world overwhelm them.

The challenges we face today are different in many ways but equally dangerous and distracting. Because we live in relative security and have so much materially compared to those early believers do we really desire Christ's return? When I was first saved I would constantly think about Christ's return and I truly believed He would come back in my lifetime. As the years have gone by I hate to admit it but I think about Christ's return far less than I did as a new believer. For Peter the immediacy of Christ's return was to be the ultimate reality that was to keep believers alert so they wouldn't fall back in love with this world.

The command to be watchful and waiting for the Christ's return has serious implications for our participation and love of ministry. If we are not living as though the end of all things is really at hand we can become distracted by many things in this world. We can think, "I have so much on my plate right now" I might serve in ministry when it's more convenient. This is the mindset that Peter has been challenging; we who are in Christ are no longer to live for what we once did. Watchfulness will reshape our desires and focus our prayers and energies on delighting and doing God's will. Christ's exhortation concerning his return is meant to shake us out of our dullness and distractions. *"Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes."*

Ministry's Heart of Perfection V.8

"Above all things" in this little phrase Peter is commending to us that which is to be the first thing in the life of our church body, love of God and then the love of our brothers and sisters. Love is primary; it is the bond, the glue that holds us together especially as the end of all things draws near. We need to take seriously Peter's warning that the end is at hand and the stresses and pressures that it will put on our relationships within the church will only increase in severity as the time draws near. We are imperfect pilgrims living in a foreign and hostile land. The enemy is always probing for opportunities to divide and conquer and without love that prefers and bears with one another our church and our ministries are in jeopardy.

The love that Peter says we are to have for one another has a very particular quality. The ESV renders it as “loving one another earnestly” the New King James says, “have fervent love for one another”. This is a central theme that is repeated throughout 1 Peter. It begins with our love for God in chapter 1 verse 8 and then in verse 22 it repeats the same imperative to earnestly love one another because we have been born again. Peter writes, “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another *earnestly* from a pure heart.” It is a love that is fully stretched out to its maximum potential, pursuing God and others. The question is how do we do that? Self-motivated rather than grace motivated fervency will certainly fade away because it cannot be sustained. What we do apart from God’s enabling grace will almost certainly turn into some form of law keeping. Therefore, it is the work of the Spirit that creates the fruit of “earnest love” in us. We are to rely and rest in God’s grace alone.

Why does Peter emphasize the word “earnestly”? Because he knows that we are easily weighted down with too many cares and temporal priorities. That is why he commends us to be serious and watchful. Otherwise our love for one another can grow lazy, cold or even resentful. We need to ask ourselves what are we really earnest about? Are most of our energies focused on, career, family, sports, or many other things that are all coming to an end? Or might we even have a heart that wants others to earnestly serve us? Let us pray for Spirit enabled earnestness, without it will be impossible to have a genuine love for ministry.

The last half of verse 8 is a direct reference to Proverbs 10:12. “*Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.*” The context of this OT verse appears in a section dealing with the effects of speech on our self and others. Godly speech is being contrasted with the destructive speech of fools. Hatred then is being stirred up by being sinned against, which is suggested in the two parallel lines. The outcome is division and dissension. This is in contrast to the love that wins over the offender and restores the relationship “*love covers all offenses*”; the idea here is that love doesn’t conceal sin but seeks to reconcile with the offender. In the Old Testament covering an offense or sin meant to obtain forgiveness. This is not a particular theological statement about God’s forgiveness of sins or about a refusal to deal with offenses that must to be confronted. It is about a love that is ready, poised and willing to forgive, a love that overcomes wounded feelings and bitterness by God’s grace.

So, earnest love pursues reconciliation between believers by covering “a multitude” or innumerable sins. Therefore, divisions and disunity are caused within the body if there is unwillingness to cover over the sins of our brothers and sisters. This is not a call to sweep sin under a rug but after all has been done to resolve conflict and offense we must willingly seek to cover over and bury the sin. Nothing has a more corrosive affect on ministry than unforgiven offenses. And it is the small offenses that most often fester and break the unity that is to mark us as God’s people. The more love covers over offenses the more we put on display the beauty of gospel.

Ministry’s Loving Imperative V.9

In verse 9 we come to one of the key duties of our life together as God’s people.

“Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.”

Early in the biblical record hospitality was to be a way of life for God’s people. We are given the same calling here in verse 9 to have open homes and hearts. This is the boots on the ground expression of loving others earnestly. And it’s not a mere moralistic ethic of being nice or friendly. It is rooted in valuing what God values -the glory of his name and the love of His people.

This God centered imperative for hospitality starts in the Old Testament. Leviticus 19:33 says:

“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

What was the reason they were to love strangers in this verse? Because God came to them when they were strangers in the land of Egypt. His heart was open and receiving to a people that were wholly undeserving. Israel did not merit God’s loving hospitality because they were often faithless and ungrateful. God was covering over their multitude of sins and showing them grace by bringing them to a home that was flowing with milk and honey.

God was displaying his gracious hospitality to Israel. He welcomed a people that were nothing like him. God has given us this same ministry to display grace and love in welcoming sinners into our homes; even those who are nothing like us.

The same necessity for hospitality was carried over into the New Testament. Peter has been making the case in the first three chapters that Christians are called to be a blessing to others. Hospitality was God’s gracious disposition towards them through His Son. That was now to be their disposition towards one another. Hospitality was also to be used as a gospel witness as they opened their homes to unbelievers.

So, hospitality is not a ministry for just the gifted few but is required of all believers. The key words in this verse that make that point clear is “to one another”. This indicates the back and forth dynamic in showing hospitality. God by his grace has called us to have open hearts and homes.

The second part of the verse has a warning. Hospitality is to be practiced without grumbling. God is well aware of our hearts to be self-focused. Grumbling indicates hearts and minds that disregard two essential truths. First, that we are recipients of God’s gracious hospitality because he has caused us to be born again and secondly that this present age is ending. Allowing our hearts and minds to drift from these truths we are prone to pursuing our own comfort and ease. Our schedules, activities, and routines are so full that we leave little room for serving and welcoming others. Unexpected or unplanned occasions to show hospitality are seen more as intrusions rather than opportunities to show love to one another. *This hits home with me. To be honest I often complain and grumble when others unexpectedly interrupt my schedule or plans. I struggle with my own heart in this area. So we must be completely dependent on the Spirit of God to transform us in this area of serving and loving others. God’s aim is to shape us to be ministry minded not comfort minded.* When we reach out in loving hospitality to others we reflect the very character of our Lord.

Ministry’s Enabling Grace V.10

Now in verse 10 Peter is going to connect the imperatives to love and show hospitality with God’s gifts and graces for the work of the ministry.

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

First then, every believer has received a gift from God for the express purpose of ministering it to others. This is the third time this little phrase “one another” has been used in these four short verses. This is clearly indicating that Peter has relationships within the church squarely in mind. All gifts are intended to have a community-oriented purpose. All gifts are chosen and distributed by God. Each of us are recipients, we do not get to choose our own gift. God has deliberately built diversity into the church so that no one can be content with his gift alone but will have need of his brothers and sisters gifting.

The diversity of gifts has two important functions. First, so that any pride or self-importance that might creep in concerning our giftedness is countered with our need for the gifts of others.

Secondly, the diversity of gifts is necessary for us to truly function as a unified body. When we use our gift we apply to the body of Christ a unique ministry not intended to be duplicated by anyone else. If we neglect the use of our gift we cause the body to lack something specific that God has intended for His people to be built up and unified in the faith.

There is a significant issue to be on guard against concerning gifts. It's the tendency of some to downplay or even deny that they have been gifted. Some may think that if they have any gifting it's simply too ordinary to be of much use. Here's why that thinking is so wrong. Ordinariness is actually an asset, so that God alone receives the glory as we serve others in any of the Chapel ministries. Gifts great or small are never about us. They are always about magnifying Christ and loving others.

The second half of the sentence helps explain the first, rather than describing any particular giftedness he shifts the focus to stewardship. Now, stewards are not the owners of the gifts but servants and trustees over them. The owner is God who is entrusting His gifts to His stewards for His purposes. Think of it this way. The church is God's house and we are all servants in His house who have been given charge over His various graces. The shift in focus from gifts to grace is significant because grace is the real treasure in God's house. We are each recipients of His grace therefore we are to faithfully distribute those graces for the benefit of others. Our spiritual gifts are the means by which God distributes His grace for strengthening the faith and well being of our brothers and sisters.

Ministry's Christ Exalting Purpose V.11

In verse 11 Peter tells us that grace is distributed through gifts that are either word or service oriented.

"...whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies"

Peter is making the point that either of these gifts is wholly dependent on God as their source. God supplies both His Word and His strength and we must rely solely on His provision to serve in ministry of any kind.

Word-oriented gifts are the means by which grace and wisdom is imparted so that all of us will be equipped for the work of ministry. Grace only comes by speaking God's Word. Those that speak the oracles of God are to speak Christ's Words not their own. This leaves no place for human wisdom, insights and philosophies when it comes to teaching and preaching in the church. Those that serve in ministry as teachers and pastors must be diligent to speak only that which they have received by and through the Word of God.

Then he says, *"whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies"*. No list of serving gifts is given here so Peter's focus is on the means by which we are to serve. God given strength for serving is a spiritual gift. When we begin to serve in our own strength it ceases to be a spiritual gift. Serving in whatever capacity is to be performed by faith and reliance on the strength God supplies. Serving in our own strength will inevitably lead to discouragement and failing desire for serving in ministry. Christ told his disciples, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing"*.

The heart's aim of all spiritual gifts is *"in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."* God never gives us gifts so that they would be used in ways that obscure His Glory, on the contrary, gifts are meant for His glory to be worked out in love for others. Any other objective in ministry even if it leads to the temporal benefit of those we are serving is idolatry. God wants the church and the world to marvel at the infinite worth and beauty of Christ as He works in us and through us. It's not just the elders, deacons and ministry leaders that are gifted for service

but every member of Christ's body here at the Chapel is gifted. We must not waste his gifts through neglect, or casual indifference. When our gifts are not being used in ministry God's grace in some way is being withheld from our brothers and sisters.

Peter and the churches he was writing to expected the soon return of Christ. That hope fueled their love and ministry. There was also the expectation that they would give an account to Christ for their stewardship of his gifts. Do we live out of hearts that believe Christ might come at any moment or does that knowledge have little to no impact on whether serve in ministry or not.

Finally, ministry exposes our hearts. When we set out to love and serve others we should expect times when our heart resists. The command to love earnestly and cover over the sins of others is never easy because of are own struggles with sin. Sacrificial love only happens when we confess, "Jesus apart from you I can do nothing". God gives gifts and grace for ministry so that He alone will be glorified through Jesus Christ. We need to examine our hearts concerning the gifting and stewardship God has uniquely given to each us. Let us not leave the gift that God has given us unused for when we do we deprive our brothers and sisters of the grace that He intends for their benefit and the Glory that is due his name.

Reflect and Respond

- Watching and waiting for Christ's return will focus our prayers and energies on delighting and doing God's will. Considering that we too are living at the end of this present evil age will do much to clear away worldly distractions and worries that keep us from loving and serving others.
- Love is to be earnest and fully extended for the good of others. Our love needs to pursue reconciliation by covering over sins and offenses, which can destroy our unity and divide our ministries.
- We are to be a people that show hospitality without grumbling. Gospel oriented hospitality is meant to serve and draw others into the richness of God's hospitality that he has shown us in Christ Jesus.
- Stewardship requires participation in ministry. This is God's means of distributing His grace to our brothers and sisters through the unique gifts that He has entrusted to each of us.
- Hearts that love others in ministry must have a singular purpose. Our aim is, "*in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ*" God never gives gifts so that they would be used to obscure or diminish His Glory, but are meant to put on display Christ's infinite worth and His gracious work in us.