

Vessels of Grace
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Be clear-minded and self-controlled.

Pray.

Love each other deeply.

Offer hospitality ... without grumbling.

Use your gifts.

So that in all these things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

(a summary of 1 Peter 4:7-11)

Take a moment now to prayerfully and reflectively read 1 Peter 4:1-11.

This passage begins with a reminder that in Christ we have died to sin.

Even in the midst of suffering, it has no hold on us. Before Christ, sin did have a hold on us. But no longer! Now that we are Christ-followers, we live “for the will of God” (verse 2). And what is the will of God? Well, for Peter, at that time, it could be summarized with the six straight-forward statements shared above.

Peter, the fisherman turned ‘fisher of men’ believed in keeping things simple, after all a fisherman’s job is pragmatic. You take care of your nets and your boat, you take note of the weather, you set sail when the fishing will be good, you put in the hard work, and you get your fish to market each day. It wasn’t a job that required a lot of philosophizing. It was a ‘get ‘er done’ kind of job. And the Christian’s call to ‘fish for men’ is pragmatic as well! Peter’s letter highlights again and again that it is simply about “doing good”. Here, in verses 7-11 he outlines

very succinctly what that meant when the church first began. It remains good advice today if we are committed to doing God's will by serving and loving the lost into the Kingdom of God.

This 6-point list of Christian virtues stands in stark contrast to the life those early believers had lived before choosing to follow Jesus. The NIV captures their 'pagan' ways as follows: "living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry" (verse 3). They lived as their fellow citizens lived. The Greek way of life was self-indulgent and pleasure-centred, driven by a "live for today, for tomorrow you die" mind-set. As I reflected on this list of vices that were so prevalent in the believer's lives before they found Jesus, it struck me that they constituted behaviours that brought only harm to body, heart, and soul. There's no sense of a 'healthy' lifestyle here. Little by little, this lifestyle would kill the physical body. Little by little, this lifestyle would crush the spirit, destroying any sense of personal worth and value. Little by little, this lifestyle would butcher relationships with family members, friends, neighbours. And these lifestyle choices most certainly would create a growing divide between the sinner and his/her holy Creator.

Is it any different in our day? As we look at the world around us. Opioid deaths are sky-rocketing. Suicide is on the rise. Alcohol, drugs, addiction is

destroying families. Self-centred, self-indulgent behaviours are impacting the hearts and souls of the people around us. For too many, there is a “live for today, for tomorrow you die” mind-set. And COVID-19 has many convinced of this like never before. People need hope. They need to believe in something greater than this moment. They need a reason to make different life choices.

The scattered believers that Peter wrote to had found that reason. They had found Christ. They knew that there was more to life. Rather than live for themselves, they were choosing to live for others, to “do good”. Ironically, their fellow citizens seemed more eager to pull them into the old self-centred, self-indulgent ways (verse 4). I picture an alcoholic’s old drinking buddies saying, “Come one. What harm can one little drink do?” It seems inevitable, when a person makes a 180 degree turn-around from sinful living to godly goodness that the world will do all it can to pull him/her back! But in Christ we are done with sin (verse 1). It has no hold on us, because we belong to God. Doing the will of God is our truest heart desire.

I have to be honest and say that it’s hard for me to relate to the list of vices shared in verse 3, having come to follow Christ as a child. But the specific list isn’t the point. The point is to recognize how Jesus has taken us each from self-indulgent to God-glorifying living. Even at age 8, I had plenty of self-centred

habits that were harmful to me and to those around me; habits that I could not escape without the power of the Spirit of Christ in me. And throughout my journey with Jesus, many sinful habits have tempted me. Some were there in my childhood; others have sought to take hold of me through adulthood. I haven't always won over temptation, I confess. But, most often, as I centre my life on doing God's will and living for others, I find those sinful behaviours hold little appeal. Though the world pleads sin's cause again and again, trying to convince me it is "good", I know the difference. The Spirit of God convinces and convicts me daily. The real "good" in this life is loving and serving God and humanity.

Peter's earliest readers knew this too. In receiving Christ they were freed from their self-indulgent ways, and the hopelessness and destruction they brought. Their lives had greater purpose ... to do God's will and, by their living, bring glory to Him. And so Peter presents this list of virtues, as a reminder of how they were to do that in the midst of suffering and persecution, in the face of mockery and goading, in a world that wasn't particularly welcoming of their love and care. His words speak to us today as well, because our circumstances are no different!

Peter prefaces these virtues with a simple statement of fact: "The end of all things is near." (verse 7a) Christ had come and through Him, God's Kingdom

was being established on earth. God's plan of salvation was moving forward. At the right moment, Christ would return in full power and glory. For those earliest believers His return was considered imminent. And truly it is, even now, 2000+ years later, because we do not know the hour of His coming. Given this reality, every moment counts as we, with God, fight for the lives of men and women who are lost in sin. So Peter commands them and us to pursue virtues that are the clear *opposite* of the life once lived, the life pursued by those who are without God:

1. Be clear-minded and self-controlled

You can't get drunk or high and be these things, so those old ways are definitely not to be part of the Christian life! But beyond that, this is a reminder that, as Christians, we need to be fully alert, level-headed in our thinking and actions, and not given to irrational emotional outbursts. The Christian life should be marked by a calmness, because we know with certainty that our All-Powerful, All-Loving God is in control. We are to 'keep our head' in every situation. God can be trusted. As we keep our head, we will help others do the same.

2. Pray

Prayer – conversation with Almighty God -- is vital to our ability to do God's will and "do good". Prayer is how we access the wisdom and counsel of the Spirit.

Prayer is how we entrust the cares and concerns that we hold for others to God. Prayer is how we tap into the power of God to resist temptation, to speak the truth in love, to proclaim the Good News! Praying, moment-by-moment, day-by-day, is God's will for us. He longs for that open conversation. Prayer is a gift from God that assures us of our intimate relationship with Him.

It's important to note, as well, that Peter says, "Be clear-minded and self-controlled, so that you can pray". It's difficult to pray well when we are engaging in self-indulgent, sinful behaviours that make our brains fuzzy and weaken our impulse to "do good". The only prayers we are capable of in those moments, and that only by the grace of God, are prayers of confession! Peter knew this first-hand, as he betrayed Jesus three times on the night of His arrest. Powerful, potent prayers for others are dependent upon our determination to be clear-minded and self-controlled in life.

3. Love Each Other Deeply

In reflecting on the need to be clear-minded and self-controlled, I cautioned against irrational emotional outbursts, but that doesn't mean that we aren't to possess true emotions; and hold to them deeply. Peter makes it clear here that love is vital, and it must run deep! The Christian life is a life of love because it is directed by our God of Love! We are made to feel and express deep emotion.

We are to have deep affection for our brothers and sisters, and for the lost. We are to love unconditionally, as Jesus did. Our love is the proof that we have moved from self-indulgent, self-centred living to God's path ... a path focussed on meeting the needs of others. Deep love is required; love that pursues the highest good for the other person. Love that is patient, kind, not envious or rude, not self-seeking or easily given to anger. Love that always protects, trusts, hopes and perseveres. Love that doesn't keep track of wrongs. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

As Peter states, we are to love deeply because love "covers over a multitude of sins". How? It enables us to put ourselves in the other person's place in order to understand the 'why' behind their behaviours and empathize with their struggle. True love for others reminds us that we also fail and falter. True love makes forgiveness possible, because it enables us to recall how many times we have needed to be forgiven.

4. Offer Hospitality

When Peter wrote his letter this was absolutely vital for the church. Believers were scattered, forced from their homes and communities by persecution. As they sought to re-establish themselves in new communities, they needed the hospitality of others. They needed another to gladly take them in, giving them shelter through the night. They needed someone to share a meal, to

welcome them to their table. The church itself had no buildings for gatherings, so the hospitality of believers with larger homes was also vital to the ability to come together for worship and prayer. Hospitality – arms of welcome that invite others in – enabled the church and its members to thrive and flourish.

Hospitality extended to non-believers was also important. It was a transient society in many ways. Welcoming the stranger, offering safety and comfort, food and rest, was a powerful way to show the love of God. As homes were opened, the Good News could be shared! Even the simple act of saying a grace before breaking bread together was a means of declaring the goodness of God to the outsider. This was the mindset that Peter called for.

What about today? With COVID-19 restrictions we aren't able to invite others into our home, but there are still many ways that we can extend a 'welcome' to others. Are we looking for them? Perhaps you have a neighbour who, because of age or ill health or family responsibilities, can't get out to shop too readily. Are you offering that assistance ... letting them know that you consider them part of your extended family? Have you considered having dinner delivered to the family next door, knowing the parents are worn out with working at home and schooling their children too? Do you have a friend who is totally isolated that you could call daily, just for a check-in, to let him/her know he/she is

deeply loved? As you get out a little bit more in these days, are you smiling (from behind your mask) and nodding a 'hello' to people in a way that expresses love and welcome? Do you seek to be courteous and compassionate with store clerks, empathetic to the extra burdens they carry in these days? Hospitality can be practiced in many ways.

5. Use Your Gifts

Every believer is given a unique set of talents, passions, abilities and spiritual gifts. They aren't to be used for self. (That would be a return to the old ways!) No! They are to be used "to serve others" (verse 10). As we use them in this way, we are "faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (verse 10)! I am blessed by grace each and every day. It calms my doubts and soothes my fears. It is by grace that I have been and continue to be saved! It is grace that has enabled God's Spirit to come and dwell in me. It is grace that empowers me to live a life of goodness. So, the thought of having some small part in 'administering God's grace' makes me very, very happy. I cannot think of any greater thrill than to be a vessel of grace in the life of another person. Peter says I am that, as I use my gifts! Wow!!!! Are you eager to be a vessel of grace? Then, whatever your gifts, use them in service to others. Peter goes on to say, "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone

serves, he should do it with the strength God provides.” (verse 11a) These gifts are just that ... gifts! God gives them to us and the Spirit enlivens and empowers them in us. When we use them, we are the very mouth, hands, and feet of God to the person served. We are vessels of His grace!

6. Let Your Very Life Give Praise to God

This is what it is really all about. Everything we do, say, think, share is to give praise to God; the One who has saved, redeemed, forgiven, and graced us! God’s will for us is that we would glorify Him by our living. And we can, through (because of) the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who stood in our place. Giving praise to God isn’t just about singing about the wonder of His love and mercy, or shouting Hallelujah (“Praise Yahweh”), or waving our hands in worship to Him ... good and important as those things are. Peter says, “in all things”, God may be praised! That’s the aim. Our very lives are to give praise to God. In choosing to be clear-minded and self-controlled, pray, love deeply, be hospitable, use our gifts in serving others, we praise God! He is absolutely worthy of that praise! So let’s shift fully from self-indulgent, self-centred living to living that glorifies, honours and praises God “in all things”!