

"...above all things"

-PART 2-

1 Peter 3:18 – 4:11

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1 Peter 3:18 - 4:11 ¹⁸For

Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but

made alive by the Spirit, ¹⁹ by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. ²¹ There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him. 4:1 Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ² that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. ³ For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. ⁴ In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you. ⁵ They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶ For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit. ⁷ But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. ⁸ And above all things have fervent love for one another, for “love will cover a multitude of sins.” ⁹ Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰ As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. ¹¹ If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

“And above all things have fervent love for one another...”

I am forever amazed as I step back and watch the world pass around me. The speed at which we live our lives and the seeming chaos which so often accompanies such. There seems to me to be an inability for humanity to grasp the reality that each one of us lives today in the shadow of our own eternity. Soon each and every one of us will stand face to face with our Creator, and we will then only have the earthly lives we lived as evidence...*perhaps we could say our only defense*, to speak of our real priorities and our true passion.

Sadly, so many within the greater church world are not doing well today. Our commitment and faithfulness is so fragile. The consciousness of God...His presence, His care, His watchful eyes... seem to be something we are unwilling to acknowledge. 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, *"Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves. Surely you know that Jesus Christ is among you; if not, you have failed the test of genuine faith."*

For quite some time now, I as your pastor, have tried to awaken the spirit of introspection in all of us. I have often pointedly called you to search your hearts and your lives...to seek assurance that you are indeed in the



fold, because many *have* set and *do* set amongst us today that want to believe that all is well with their soul, but in fact they have never truly surrendered their lives and thus have never actually been reborn. We seem incapable of grasping the level of religious activity one can participate in and yet still not actually be surrendered and reborn. And the worst aspect of this is that they are beyond consideration that all is *not* well with their soul! They effectively live just like the world and yet they believe they are ok with their Creator. Titus 1:13 tells me to "*reprimand them sternly to make them strong in the faith.*" So I take every opportunity to call you to this self-analysis. Because for many of us, our lives speak what our tongues are unwilling to. Hebrews 6:8 tells us that "*...if a field bears thorns and thistles, it is useless. The farmer will soon condemn that field and (will) burn it.*"

Despite the stark evidence of our lives, we often reject the fact that God indeed operates in a realm of black and white. A place where nuance, excuses, and human reasoning carry no weight, and souls are lost for eternity because truth was received mentally but never lived out. We mistake His grace for tolerance, and His silence for acceptance. We are so often caught up in the arena of church, religion and the faith community but live double lives where we clandestinely yet purposely transgress both God's grace and his commands. Titus 1:16 tells us that "*Such people claim they know God, but they deny him by the way they live. They are detestable and disobedient, worthless for doing anything good.*"

Peter draws the reader into this reality, and in the text warns us that we would all do well to hold tightly to each waking moment. Everyone here today is dying, and all of us will answer for how we lived. 2 Corinthians 5:10 reminds us of this: "*For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body.*" Peter calls us to be "serious and watchful" ...to be "sober," the Old King James says. Such speaks of having both a "sound mind, and self-control." Things that are alien to this passing world.

This passage, like many others, is given to serve as a wake-up call to all of us. We who believe ourselves to be God's children cannot afford to play fast and loose with God's call to commitment ...to sanctification and holiness. Time is not "on our side." Unless we take our faith out of the theory realm...out of the church walls...out of the box of "religion", and place it firmly into our lives, right down to our mouths, our hands, and our feet, then we lack the supernatural power of Creator God who says that when we are reborn, He lives inside of us. If that is truth, then we will not only *believe* in Christ, but indeed *live* Christ! If we do not, then we do not truthfully know Him and are the saddest of all humanity, for we are thus merely fools.

Today, it is popular for churches to have "healing ministries." People who have grown tired of hearing God's correction in some church and are now "wounded" by it. But since when is it the church's job to heal you? I thought that was God's job, and that the gospel of salvation heals us? But it's good for attendance because it portrays every other church as bad and abusive for teaching the Word of God, and your church as the savior of all those who have been hurt by it. That's classic cultic...not to mention overtly unscriptural. It is however very "today." It's what the masses want. I can't help but think of the old Fleetwood Mac tune "tell me lies, tell me lies, tell me sweet little lies..."

2 Timothy 4:2-4 tells me to "*Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.*" Titus commands me to "*reprimand them sternly.*" In light of such directions, what should I then do as a pastor?

Peter says in this chapter....vs 17, that "*judgment must begin here...in the house of the Lord.*" He points the finger right at us. For we, the body of Christ, know the truth, and are without excuse. We are called into Christ...into the path of discipleship. We, the "house of God," are being held accountable. Peter tells us that the truth that he has shared is a very real part of the gospel, the "good news" of Christ, and that "gospel" brings powerful change into our lives.

Do we have a real love today? Do we trust Him with the whole of our care? Are we willing to "commit the keeping of our souls to Him?" Not just in the eternal realm, but here and now? Not to a church, but to HIM? Is He our Lord, or are we attempting to relegate Him to the mere position of Savior, and then we want Him to go away and leave us alone, and we cry "grace, grace" whenever anyone tries to speak some truth into our lives?

It seems that those who should worry about these things never do, and those who should not, spend their days wringing their hands. How am I to love you on this matter? How do I calm the hearts of those who live imperfect lives in an imperfect world but love Christ deeply and sincerely, and indeed, even with flaws and failures, reflect Christ and salvation beautifully? How do I set your heart at ease and encourage you, while still correcting and call out those who are prideful and flippant on the issue of their salvation, readily accepting transgression against Christ and willing to live double lives...one at church, and another one flagrantly rejecting scriptural directions...biblical commands? It is a ministerial and preaching dilemma for me. For I am called to love you. We are called to love one another. What should that look like?

Verse 8 of chapter 4 tells us, "*And above all things have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins.'*" That word 'love' herein is the Greek word 'agape.' That is the love that transcends and trumps all earthly love, because it is literally "God love." Philippians chapter 2 tells us that this love is evidenced by a unity of spirit and mind in the body of Christ. It is more than the mediocre popish fondness that is expressed by this world. It is more than the "live and let live" tolerance that is so expressed by this world under the false banner of love. It is rather a love that endures and a love that sacrifices for others. It is a love that is hospitable and is an open book. And it is a love that is honest, that is truthful, and is sacrificial. I cannot say I love you unless I am willing not only to "wave you off" as you careen toward the cliff at the speed of the world, but will even step between you and the edge in attempt to stop you. That is agape love. It is the love of the cross. And therefore it is a love that can greatly hurt me for exercising it, and frankly it often does.

It is the love that allowed Himself to be "beaten beyond recognition" when He had in him the power and ability to not only stop them, but could have destroyed them all with a word. It is the love of 1 Corinthians 13. It is the love of Philippians 2:8...as He lowered Himself to become a man, and the love of Romans 5:8...as He died for us while we were still sinners, and John 14:3 that says He is coming back for all of us. It is the unqualified numero uno evidence that I am of Christ. Because 1 John 4:8 tells us that "*Whoever does not love (agape) does not know God, because God is love.*" But hear me on this: God does not love like us and agape is not earthly love.

Earthly love is self-seeking and feels good. Agape is God seeking and other seeking, and honestly often *feels* really bad. Agape is dangerous. Agape is costly. Agape is as likely to cause you to hate me as love me in return. Such is evidenced everyday out there by those who hate God and all He stands for. Agape is truthful always, and faithful forever. It is this one issue that so separates the two groups I spoke of previously. Those who should worry and those who need not. But unless we understand what this kind of love really looks like then it fails as the litmus test that it really should be.

Because we feel a fondness and even a deep emotion for those around us, does not mean we are "agape" loving

them. That kind of 'love' is sooner or later manifested by quickly and inexplicably turning to anger because the 'love' that you were giving was practiced in a 'slot-machine' style: one where you expected a return and when it was not reciprocated in the quantity, quality, or speed that you felt such deserved, then the whole relationship was instantly rejected, and you walk away. Such amazes me! To watch people who were in a community for 10 or 15 years, depart in a tiff and erase those years from their lives. Everything that was done...everything they experienced during those years...however joyous, would now be erased from the hard drive. How can you do that? I haven't enough blocks of 10-15 years in the totality of my life to spare those! It happens because the love that was lived was not agape love, it was selfish love. I loved me.

It is that agape love that causes me to translate my God-given, Spirit anointed gifts into service to others. It's about them. Peter calls us to serve with anointed gusto...with all that we have and all that we are. And when we do, we likely will experience some "fiery trials." Because Jesus loved in that way, and He paid dearly for doing so! Such love has one overwhelming attribute, and that is it is *sacrificial*. It gives, even if it pains us.

We are...as true and faithful children of God, to have more than a passive surrender to such sufferings, but rather we are to "rejoice" that we have been chosen to share in something so quintessentially Christ. This is why such love is the express qualifier and "litmus test" of our faith standing. It is a love that cannot be "mustered up" or practiced with any kind of faithful continuance without being Spirit-filled by God. Only the true born-again believer can know this kind of love; one who has died to the things of this world, and now desires to operate in a realm where "to live is Christ," with no reservation.

The picture Peter presents in this passage is that of a soldier who puts on his equipment and arms himself for battle. Our attitudes are weapons, and weak or wrong attitudes will lead us to defeat. Outlook determines outcome, and a believer must have the right attitudes if he is to live a right life.