

GOOD STEWARDS OF HIS GRACE

1 Peter 1: 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.*

A few weeks ago I unpacked a little of verse 7, how the “end of all things” isn’t just talking about the imminent end of the world, but how the outcome, end purpose, goal of all things is at hand in our lives today – that is, God’s purpose, that we should be living Kingdom-focused lives in the here and now. And we should be SERIOUS about that – it should be at the core of how we think about ourselves, our identity should be wrapped around that. It is the business of every believer to be living in such a way “that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.”

(And all the more so as we contemplate a) there are many signs that the end of the age IS imminently upon us, and b) regardless of our nearness to the end, life is SHORT, our days are numbered, and the opportunities to live for Jesus are limited. Are you using them wisely, redeeming the time before you also stand before Him and your works are tested by fire?)

Looking at the passage as a whole, I went on to say, Serious, Kingdom-focused living is one-another living. Serious, Kingdom-focused living is using your gifts. Serious, Kingdom-focused living is recognizing that time is valuable, and needs to be redeemed for eternal purposes. Serious, Kingdom-focused living is thinking clearly, accurately, modestly, about who I am, what God has given me, and how I fit into His body, the church. And then doing what He would have me doing, to the utmost capacity that He supplies by His grace! Now I want to add some notes to those ideas.

Steve's been talking about the "one-anothers" of the Bible. Look what Peter says: ABOVE ALL have fervent love for one another! Why? Love covers a multitude of sins! When people live in community, they may sin against each other. What is our response to be? Anger, hate, and revenge will not serve God's purpose. He is intent on *uniting* us into one body, one new man, a holy bride for His Son. God's *agape* love, applied fervently through forgiveness, forbearance, tolerance, patience, and longsuffering, covers a multitude of sins, and helps fulfill God's purpose.

Love includes being hospitable to one another... without grumbling! "Share with others" is a lesson we are taught early in life. But I still have a hard time sharing without grumbling; my flesh, this outward man, is naturally selfish & unwilling to share. So, I must deny myself, take up my cross, and follow Jesus in this matter... without grumbling! (Lord help me!)

Romans 12:13 says we are to be "*distributing to the needs of the saints,*" and "*given to hospitality.*" Two notes here: 1) how can you distribute to the needs of the saints, if you don't know their needs? If you're not intimately involved in the lives of other people in the Body, how can you be aware of what they need, whether it be prayer, material goods, emotional support, or spiritual building up? 2) The Greek literal meaning of "given" is *pursuing*. To run swiftly to catch a person or thing, to seek after eagerly, earnestly strive to acquire. It's not just happenstance, when the stars align. I *pursue* hospitality! Go out of my way to show love & be generous to others!

Hospitality is not a gifting! It's a command and responsibility charged to all believers. Some people may seem more gifted in this area, but *all* are called to demonstrate Christ's love in practical ways to others. There are some in this assembly who have truly given themselves to hospitality, over and over to many others throughout the years. Others of us, maybe less so, and perhaps the Lord would have us step up our game!

Peter goes on to talk about spiritual giftings. It's a condensed version of what Paul details in Romans 12:3-8, 1 Cor. 12-14, and Ephesians 4:11-16.

We each have a gift! You can't say God hasn't given you a gift, because scripture says He has! As His steward, you are responsible to use it properly. If you don't know what it is, the 1st duty of your stewardship is to discover it, learn about it, find out what He wants you to do with it.

Here's an important lesson about spiritual giftings: Our English word "gift" misleads us because we think of shiny new toys wrapped up under the Christmas tree that we get to play with. But the Greek words *charisma* and *charismata* refer to a different concept: *the working of God's grace through us*. The working of God's grace can take many forms, and it works through us *for the benefit of others*. The gift is not a toy to play with, it is a work do on behalf of others. God graciously wants you to be His coworker in building up the body of Christ, and He graciously supplies the spiritual resources to do that work.

Ephesians 2:10 encourages us with two wonderful thoughts: 1) God has created us in Christ Jesus for good works, and 2) He has already prepared these good works for us to walk in them!

When we are born again, we become a new creation in Christ. Our old identity as a sinner condemned to wrath is removed, and we become a child of God. God may take some of our natural abilities, interests, experiences, and training, bring them under the discipline of the Spirit, and use them for His glory going forward. Or He may discard them, and focus on using you in new ways, with the new spiritual gifts that He gives by the Spirit. Either way, you have a new purpose and a new path in life!

Not only does He work in you to equip you for doing good works – He also prepares the good works and puts them in your path! All you have to do is walk by faith, listen for His voice, look for His signposts, trust that He is giving you sufficient resources for whatever He is putting in your way. You are made for the work, and the work is made for you!

The question is, are you ready and willing to be a worker, or do you just want to be blessed with some nice shiny toys? A good steward is one who comes to the Lord each day saying, “Lord, here am I. How can I serve you? What does Your grace want to do through me? What is Your will, Your plan for today? Not my will, but Your will be done.”

Scripture says, “earnestly desire the best gifts.” What are the best gifts? The best gifts are 1) the gift that God gives you right now, 2) the gift that meets the need of the moment, 3) the gift that edifies, builds up, encourages, comforts, consoles, forgives, forbears, longsuffers, or otherwise shows the love of Christ to the person next to you, in front of you, right now.

Sometimes the best gift is just showing up, with a smile instead of grumbling and complaining, ready and willing to be or do whatever God wants. *Availability* is the first ability He’s looking for. Can He call on you, can His grace effectually work through you today?

Romans 12:5,6 says we are “...members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them...” And **1 Cor. 12:7**, “But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all” and **1 Cor. 14:26**, “...Let all things be done for edification [the building up of others].”

Ephesians 4:11,12 says certain giftings are given – what we call the 5-fold ministry – not to put them on a pedestal, but so they can *equip/outfit/train/prepare* the rest of the saints “to do the work of ministry/service,” which is to edify or build up the body of Christ until we reach the goal that God is aiming for, the end or outcome of all things: the unity of the faith, the true knowing of the Son of God, to complete maturity, to the very “*measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*” We are all called to ministry, we are all priests, we are all called to serve in God’s army, God’s mission, God’s household chores.

Eph. 4:16 is key here: “...from whom [Christ the Head] the whole Body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the Body for the edifying of itself in love.”

Every joint supplies! I’m a joint, you’re a joint, and every joint has a supply, a working of God’s grace that is working in you and wants to work through you. There is an *effectual* (KJV) working by which every part does its share. That’s what the 5-fold is equipping the saints for, and that’s what every saint is supposed to doing: doing their share.

Their share of what? Causing growth of the Body, edifying the Body in love, each using their gifting to benefit others – using the grace God has given you in an effectual way to meet the needs of others, distributing to the needs of the saints. I may be a 5-fold minister, but I have needs just like any member, which can only be supplied by other members. You have needs only others can supply. You also have a particular supply, that is meant for others – they won’t get it, if you don’t give it.

By the way, I want to adjust our thinking about something: we talk about certain ministers or ministries being “anointed,” by which we mean, powerfully empowered by the Spirit. But that’s not really a scriptural use of that word, and it’s easily corrupted by our own fleshly understanding – we often mistake Spirit anointing for emotional impact and our own intellectual agreement. If it moves us and we like it, it’s “anointed” – but if it’s boring or we disagree with it, it’s not “anointed.” Those are false judgments.

The true measure of giftings is, is it *effective* in God’s program? Is it done God’s way, in God’s timing, by God’s means, to His glory? Many things we will not be able to judge until God tests them by fire at the end of the age. The Pharisees didn’t think either John the Baptist or Jesus were anointed at all. Jesus said, “*wisdom is justified by all her children.*”

There are manifold giftings of God's grace! We should aim to be *effectual* in the working of God's Spirit through us, however He chooses to work, not for people to say "oh, how anointed you are today!" because we met their standard of approval.)

That's how the Body works. That's God's program in the earth. It's what we are to be very serious and sober about, pursuing diligently and eagerly, without grumbling, doing our share. How in the world can the lone wolf Christian, the "I'll find God on the golf course" Christian, the out-in-the-wilderness/desert Christian find or fulfill their purpose and calling? It's not out there on your own, it's in fellowship, it's in relationship to the other members, it's in the sharing of hospitality and distributing to the needs and passing around the working of God's grace to one another.

Manifold grace! I don't believe we have anywhere near a complete listing of spiritual gifts in the Bible. The lists we have are each different, and I think the hint here is that there is no end to God's creativity, His individuality, His infinite riches of grace and kindness, that He can express through us poor earthen vessels. If you try to go it on your own, how much you miss out on! It's inconceivable! If you withhold what God has given you, what a precious gift the rest of us are missing out on.

Forget about apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, teacher, etc... Simply "*desire the best gifts.*" Again, what are the best gifts? The best gifts are 1) the gift that God gives you right now, 2) the gift that meets the need of the moment, 3) the gift that shows the love of Christ to the person next to you, in front of you, right now.

We may need to ask Him some questions, seriously pursue Him: "Lord, what do you want me to do? What grace are you working through me? Am I doing my share? What is my share?" Make yourself available, listen carefully, see what He will do through you!

The 5-fold and the elders may be of some assistance. We can pray for you, lay hands on you to impart some spiritual gifting, to release something. Maybe you need the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Maybe you need to submit yourself to some serious discipleship. Maybe you need to demonstrate faithfulness in some little things before the Lord gives you the keys to the kingdom! Are you willing – willing for *anything* the Lord wants, not just what you want. Are you willing to be available, whatever that may entail, however that might turn your life upside down?

The end of all things is at hand. Life is short. Will you make the most of the time to serve His purpose and bring glory to Him?