

I had the opportunity to attend a Christian high school growing up. In my junior year, we had a substitute teacher for our Bible Class on Romans. And like most high school students when they have a sub, we tried our best to steer them from the curriculum of the day and get on a fun tangent. Our mission was a success! We got our sub to talk about the “end times.” Who doesn’t want to know about the end times and, more specifically, when will the end times happen? Our sub went on and on and finally told us the end of the world would occur in June of 1986! Much to my and my classmates’ dismay, we didn’t want Jesus to come back in June of 1986! That meant no graduation ceremony, no class trip to Hawaii, none of us going off to college, or getting married and having kids.

When we think about the end times, that is where our mind often wanders. To the things we won’t be able to do or experience. Now, after the last two years, you may be thinking the “end of all things is near.” I know I have. With age comes perspective, and my mind has shifted from what I can’t experience to how should I live my life when the end of all things is near? Don’t worry; I’m not going to give you a doomsday sermon on the second day of the new year! But if we have a growing sense that we want to enter 2022 differently, I think the apostle Peter can help us answer the question, with the end of all things near, how should we live our lives?

The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. 1 Peter 4:7-11.

Let me give you a little context before we jump into our passage today. Peter wrote this letter to “those exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia...” These believers were citizens of God’s Kingdom but living as exiles across the known world. They were scattered due to persecution, suffering, and other adversities.

Until now, Peter has talked a lot about suffering: suffering for doing good, suffering while living in a secular society, how to be holy in the world, which will often bring suffering and remind us that we too are

exiles in a strange land. Because of Jesus, we have hope between these two worlds and hope in our suffering.

In his letter, Peter introduces a new phrase, “the end of all things is near.” You might wonder, why would Peter say this? It’s 2000 years later, and the “end of all things is near?” Was Peter wrong? Not at all!

What does “the end of all things is near” actually mean? What happened in Jesus’ death and resurrection was the ushering in of a whole new era. This is the beginning of the end of life as we know it. God has already started, through Jesus, the process of the last age. The first coming of Jesus inaugurated a new era. So when Peter talks about the end of all things being near, we are awaiting the suddenness of Christ’s return. That is, He could come back at any moment.

Think of it this way: we act in urgency and simplicity when we know time is short. I remember getting the news that my mom had cancer; nothing else mattered. Our family lived in an urgency, knowing that time could be short, and we wanted to make the most of it. When people are faced with a tornado or hurricane, they grab the essentials and head for cover. Being short on time requires both simplicity and urgency.

Christ has come. We are waiting for his return, and we are living in the time where the “end of all things is near.” Peter is encouraging us to live in these last days with simplicity and urgency as we wait with hope for the return of Christ. As we wait and enter 2022, Peter gives us four ways to live our lives in a way that glorifies God in simplicity and urgency.

Clear-Minded Prayer

With “the end of all things near,” Peter turns our attention to prayer. It is more than prayer. He says, “*Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray*” (v. 7b). Peter is saying this from experience! Remember when Peter was in the Garden of Gethsemane with the other disciples, and Jesus asked them to pray? Jesus comes back to find them asleep, and he says, “*Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?*” He asked Peter. “*Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*” (Matt. 26:40b-41). Peter wasn’t alert or sober-minded and wasn’t praying and preparing himself for what was about to happen. As a result, He wasn’t drawing strength from the Lord and acted out in a panic. When the guards came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, in his panic, Peter ended up cutting the servant of the high priest’s ear off in an act to defend and protect Jesus.

Peter is exhorting this group of early Christians and us to be alert, to be sober or clear-minded in our suffering as we are drawn to prayer. We don’t need to panic! When the world is spinning out of control, pray. What is prayer? It’s communication or communion with God. Good

communication requires both talking and listening. Prayer requires both talking and listening!

As we sit in the presence of God, he invites us to share our burdens, fears, and suffering with Him. He wants us to realize that we are totally dependent on Him. I love what Chuck Swindoll says about prayer.

Prayer sharpens our awareness so that we are able to be more discerning. It gives us genuine hope and confidence in Christ in the midst of confusion. When you're panicking, you're not praying. When you're reacting, you are not trusting in your sovereign God.

A Deep Love For Each Other.

You will see that each of the following commands Peter shares will stem from prayer. From prayer, Peter moves to love. When you think about it, prayer moves us to love! When we face suffering or persecution, love shown from a brother or sister in Christ is one of the most encouraging acts we as believers can do and experience. Peter exhorts us, *"Above all, love each other deeply because love covers over a multitude of sins"* (v. 8). With the end of all things near, Peter reminds us to love one another. It speaks of persistence, intensity, determination, much like an athlete determined to win or cross a finish line. Do we love our brothers and sisters in Christ like that?

It's easy to love those Christians we like. How about loving those Christians we don't like, who have wronged us, or have different opinions than we do? We all know or have fellow believers who are difficult to love, who have hurt us or wronged us. After the last two years, I think many of us have felt this. People who were once your dear friends, brothers, and sisters in Christ are no longer. If I were to guess, it revolves around one of three things: politics, vaccination, or masks. Relationships have fallen apart over these topics the last two years! Peter is telling us; we are to love them deeply or fervently as well. He uses the phrase "because love covers over a multitude of sins." He is paraphrasing Proverbs 10:12, *"Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs."*

The opposites are reflected in Proverbs 10:12, hate/love, stirs/covers. We have seen this dichotomy play out the last two years. The world acts in hate and stirs up conflict, and yet when we respond as the world would, when we hold back forgiveness, we discredit one another and Jesus. It is difficult to have true Christian community when we hold on to the offenses that have happened to us and respond the way the world would.

I'm blown away by how this little piece of fabric, a mask, has stirred up so much conflict. It has caused dissension, quarrels, intense feelings of entitlement, anxiety, frustration, physical abuse, the end of friendships, and torn apart families not only in the world but in the church! Even more painful, we don't let love enter in. Peter says, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." How do we love and commune with people we disagree with?

First, I think it's important to ask the question, "What does love require of me?" We live in the "cancel culture," and it's leaking into the church. We can choose to make a member of our community feel absolutely

wrong and cancel them from our life and our community, or we can lean into these conversations in love and really listen. When we ask ourselves, "What does love require of me?" It puts our defensiveness at ease and can put us in a place where we can lovingly listen.

We have a motto on staff at CPC, "keep short accounts." We have a staff of 25 or so people; trust me, every now and then, we don't all get along! When we let things fester, when we act in the flesh as described in 1 Peter 2:1 by responding in malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind," we create difficult working relationships and hinder our staff community and ministry. We are no different than the world. When one of us has wronged another, we get to the bottom of it! We give forgiveness freely. We don't let it fester because of our love for one another.

You may not know this, but Mark Mitchell planned on retiring five years before he actually retired. For Mark's first retirement announcement, I had worked on it for almost four months: researching how other churches made these kinds of announcements, getting a website ready, getting the copy ready, writing out the timeline, putting videos together, and so much more. We had gone as far as telling the staff that he would be retiring. We all gathered the next week at our staff meeting, and Mark announced that he would not be retiring. He and Lynn had a check in their heart about it and felt God telling them to stay.

First, I love Mark and was glad he was going to stick around a bit longer, but I was so angry because of all the hours I put into his retirement announcement. My anger leaked out as I vented to a couple of people on staff and said some things about Mark in my anger. Well, those things got back to Mark. He asked to see me and asked me about what I said. I broke down and told him my frustrations and that I was wrong to lash out in my anger. I apologized profusely, and then he uttered, "Sandy, I forgive you." He gave it so freely and once again modeled one of the core values of grace. What I remember the most when he said, "I forgive you," was his tone. It dripped with grace and love. I truly believed he forgave me! Keep short accounts! Remember when it was ok to disagree with people and still love them? Let's bring that practice back in 2022! It's ok to agree to disagree and still love one another and be friends.

Understanding how to love each other deeply because love covers a multitude of sins is key to our faith and our Christian community, especially during the midst of suffering. Peter is not saying that we ignore sin in our lives or our community. Love also exhorts and disciplines when it comes to sin. Just like a parent would discipline their child in love, our heavenly Father does the same for us.

Think of the story of Jesus and Peter in John 21. Jesus reinstates Peter and asks him, "Peter, do you love me?" Could you imagine if Jesus did not let love prevail when Peter betrayed him? None of us would be sitting here in what we call church! Because of the Father's great love for us, let us demonstrate the great love we have for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ!

What does it look like when we love each other deeply? Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. vv. 4-7

When I look at this description of love, I'm convicted every time. I know I can't love people this way unless I'm relying on Jesus Christ to give me the power, which ties back to why Peter encourages us to be "alert and sober minded, so that we may pray." It's our dependence on Jesus that allows us to be loving, patient, and kind.

Hospitality

Peter then calls us to be hospitable. "*Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling*" (v. 9). Ever been to another believer's home, and they make you feel like a part of the family? Isn't that an amazing experience? In our love for one another, we are called to open our home to fellow believers, whether it's a meal, lodging, hosting a Bible study, or, as in Peter's day, hosting church. In Peter's day, missionaries and preachers didn't stay at the inns because they were considered a place of ill-repute. So the need for Christians to open their homes to these fellow believers became crucial.

Showing hospitality comes with a cost. At times it can be inconvenient, more expensive, and a loss of privacy, yet; Peter reminds us that we are to do this without grumbling.

We reside in one of the most expensive places to live on the planet! I've experienced hospitality from many of you. You have had interns and residents live in your home for a year or more, rent-free, which has freed them up to do ministry and not worry about where or how they can possibly afford to live here.

For me, I'm grateful and thankful for the generosity and hospitality of some believers in the body who have given up their townhouse for me to live in at a below-market rate. They could get triple of what they are charging, yet their attitude is that the townhouse is the Lord's; let's use it for Him and let ministry happen in what He has given them. Because of their hospitality, I've been able to live and serve here for a long time. I haven't had to say goodbye to CPC due to the cost of living. Because of their hospitality, countless students have heard the gospel, and their lives have been changed. Because of their hospitality, that townhouse has been a safe haven for adults and students alike. How can we be hospitable to not only the ministries within CPC but to our fellow believers?

Max Lucado says this about hospitality.

Long before the church had pulpits and baptisteries, she had kitchens and dinner tables. Even a casual reading of the New Testament unveils the house as the primary tool of the church. The primary gathering place of the church was the home. Consider the genius of God's plan. The first generation of Christians was a tinderbox of contrasting cultures and backgrounds. At least fifteen different nationalities heard Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Jews stood

next to Gentiles. Men worshiped with women. Slaves and masters alike sought after Christ. Can people of such varied backgrounds and cultures get along with each other?

The early church did—without the aid of sanctuaries, church buildings, clergy, or seminaries. They did so through the clearest of messages (the Cross) and the simplest of tools (the home).

Not everyone can serve in a foreign land, lead a relief effort, or volunteer at the downtown soup kitchen. But who can't be hospitable? Do you have a front door? A table? Chairs? Bread and meat for sandwiches? Congratulations! You just qualified to serve in the most ancient of ministries: hospitality.

Something holy happens around a dinner table that will never happen in a sanctuary. In a church auditorium, you see the backs of heads. Around the table, you see the expressions on faces. In the auditorium, one person speaks; around the table, everyone has a voice. Church services are on the clock. Around the table, there is time to talk.

Hospitality opens the door to uncommon community. It's no accident that hospitality and hospital come from the same Latin word, for they both lead to the same result: healing. When you open your door to someone, you are sending this message: "You matter to God and me." You may think you are saying, "Come over for a visit." But what your guest hears is, "I'm worth the effort." Max Lucado, *Outlive Your Life* (Nelson, 2010), p. 55

Our Peninsula culture can be an inhospitable place at times. Although, I think through the pandemic, many of us have gotten to know our neighbors for the first time. Pre-pandemic, we lived in our little cubicles; we opened our garage doors, drove in, closed the garage, and entered our houses without ever knowing our neighbors. We could come to a church and hide in the crowd and never be known! Now you can attend church and hide behind a screen and never be known! Community is at the core of our very being. We were created for community. I'm convinced the way we will win people to Christ and add them to the community of believers is through hospitality. Don't we all want to feel that we are "worth the effort"!

Being hospitable in your daily life doesn't need to be time-consuming. Act out of urgency and simplicity. It doesn't have to be a three-course meal! Hospitality can be simple. Here are a few ideas. Invite someone over for tea or coffee. Do a movie night with popcorn and drinks. Have someone over for brunch or lunch. Host a hot chocolate night. Have a game night and invite your neighbor as you enjoy nachos together

Serve one another

Peter commands us, "*...use whatever gift you have received to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace in various forms*" (v. 10b). As believers, we have all been given a spiritual gift, and God wants us to use it! What is a spiritual gift? Spiritual gifts are supernatural abilities invested in believers by the indwelling Holy Spirit by which the living Christ inside

expresses His love through us to others. (Thanks, Dale Heer!) You can find all of the different spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12-14, and Ephesians 4:11.

I remember the first time I heard about spiritual gifts. My high school small group leader had us do a year-long study on spiritual gifts. Taking the time to learn about them proved to be a catalyst in my own life as I was encouraged to discover mine as well as use them to build up the body of Christ.

CPC has always been a place where we encourage people to use their gifts. Twenty-two years ago, I was sitting in my elder interview. They were asking me all kinds of questions and the topic of spiritual gifts came up. Their exhortation was that we train people up at CPC to use their gifts and serve. I remember it like yesterday; John Brandon said, "We will never be the church who hires for everything. Fan the flame of people's gifts, teach them to serve; they are the true ministers in this church. Your job is to work your way out of a job!" Each of you here has a calling and a ministry. The church is all about every person in the body of Christ using their gift.

I'll never forget how the church body took care of my family after my mom passed. In our suffering, we saw the spiritual gifts of hospitality, mercy, serving, giving, exhortation, and pastoring. All used in love to build us up. This...this is the church! It's so much more than a Sunday morning. When you relegate your communion to the community on Sundays only, you miss the most beautiful side of the body of Christ.

Peter summarizes the gifts in two categories, speaking and serving. *"If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides..." (v. 11a)*. He insists we use our gifts relying on God's strength, proclaiming His word, all the while not serving ourselves but serving one another.

Finally, Peter ends this section with a doxology of sort. *"...so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen" (v. 11b)*. Peter reminds us of our purpose and how we should live because the end is near. We are called to pray, love, show hospitality, and serve one another with urgency and simplicity. Why? It's so that God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. When we live in such a way, we are leaving the results up to Christ, relying on Him to use us and give us His hope to help one another persevere as exiles in a troubled land, knowing that the end of all things is near. The community of believers who glorify God will pray, love, and serve in the last days.

Last summer, my niece graduated from college. It feels like yesterday that I was holding her in the NICU. I've been a big part of my niece's life through a series of circumstances. I feel this urgency to impart more

wisdom to her as she is ushered into adulthood. Is she prepared and ready for what awaits her? I feel this same urgency in Peter's words.

The older I get, the time gets shorter, the end is near. This urgency for our church community and the lost has been in the forefront of my mind, especially as we relaunched last March. In this crazy, mixed-up world we live in, more than ever, people are searching for something more, searching for meaning and purpose, and searching for Jesus. Unlike any time I've experienced in my lifetime, Peter reminds me for the very purpose that I have been called, that we have been called, to live this way as strangers in a strange land.

In 2022, will you join me in living this way? Be alert and clear-minded in your prayer life, love one another deeply, practice hospitality, and use your spiritual gifts, all to glorify God as the end of all things is near. When the world sees that kind of community, it's irresistible.

Father, thank you for making all things new. Thank you for all that you've allowed into our lives this past year, the good things along with the hard things, which have reminded us how much we need you and rely on your presence filling us every single day.

We pray for your Spirit to lead us each step of this New Year. We ask that you will guide our decisions and turn our hearts to deeply desire you above all else. We ask for help to pursue you first, to love one another deeply, to offer authentic hospitality, and give us the strength and courage to use the gifts you have given us this year. Amen.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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