

Love One-Another Deeply
Titus 2:1-15, 1 Peter 4:1-11

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is our last message in our series on Things that We Need to Hear as we come out of a rather tough year of personal trials, and facing the challenges that come from offending and being offended by each other, and the temptation to withdraw from the church in all of that.

And we've heard how we can work through these trials by praying together, recognizing the "bait" of offense and refusing to take it, and having our characters show the qualities of gentleness and peace.

And those qualities of gentleness and peace continue to underline what the Apostle Paul instructs Pastor Titus to teach to the various groups in his church.

If you are characterized by gentleness and peace then you can cheerfully put up with your station in life – and endure even the most unpleasant stations, such as that of being a slave – to serve others and work for their good... all for the sake of the

gospel. Which reminds us of last weeks' message where Paul urged people to help Eudia and Syntche agree with each other because they had contended at his side for the gospel.

Now it's important that we hear such scriptures as Titus 2, because the truth is that enduring in our station as "a slave or a servant" really goes against the grain of our "national" character as Canadians because we have built our society around the goal of individual self-fulfillment and freedom.

But, as the Holy Spirit makes us more and more like Christ and as our character changes we become more concerned about others' salvation that self-fulfillment and freedom, and we are willing to endure injustice – as Christ did – for the sake of witnessing to the power of the gospel instead of fulfilling self.

However, this is often misunderstood and can be misused to justify the perpetration of various injustices in a given society. There are many who would accuse the New Testament writers of justifying and endorsing slavery, and encouraging the oppression of women.

However such abusive statements about the scriptures come from people who have not really read them, or do not understand them – because if they did they would notice, as we have seen over the past couple of weeks, that in the N.T. there is an awareness and expectation that Jesus Christ is going to return very soon.

When we were looking at Phil 4:5, we saw that Paul wrote *“Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”*

And James also writes in his letter; *“You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near...”* (5:8)

And this morning we heard the Apostle Peter declare; *“the end of all things is near!”* (4:7)

And these are but three examples of many found in the New Testament which show how the early church expected Jesus to return during their lifetime to bring in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

And in this New Creation, according to the prophet Isaiah; *“The Lord’s justice will dwell in the desert, his righteousness live in the fertile field. The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest.”* (Isa 32:16-18)

So... we can forgive the early church and the apostles for not immediately launching a social justice campaign to fight against slavery and any other oppressive social practices.

Because they were convinced that in a very short time Jesus would return and any such injustices would be judged and corrected in the Kingdom of Heaven. That’s why Paul says in Romans 8:18 *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*

So this belief and expectation that Jesus Christ was going to return very soon helps us to better understand how, and why, our Christian character enables us to endure unjust situations and circumstances in life.

It is not that we approve of injustice and oppression and make ourselves doormats... but rather that we expect and anticipate Christ's return where he will judge and correct such things in His reign, so we can put up with them in the mean-time.

The problem is that we are still waiting for Christ's return – and while we can truly say His return is near and close by, because it is the only remaining portion of God's overall plan of redemption that has yet to be fulfilled, we don't know exactly when that will occur.

As Jesus himself says *“about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert.”* (Mk 13:32-33)

Why? Because it will be sudden and unexpected, like a thief in the night (1 Thess 5:2) so Jesus says *“If he (the Master) comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”* (Mk 13:36-37)

Now, the question we need to ask ourselves friends – is it part of our Christian character to be alert and watchful? Do we live with the expectation that the return of our Lord Jesus is near and will come suddenly and unexpectedly for those who are not alert and watching?

Or have we been lulled into a false sense of complacency, as Peter saw occurring already back in his time and needed to address when he wrote his second letter stating; *“They will say, ‘Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.”* (2 Peter 3:3-4)

You see brothers and sisters in Christ – if we are not watching and waiting, if that is not part of our character, and if we have stopped believing that Christ will actually return to judge and bring in justice and establish the Kingdom of Heaven - then it creates problems for us in two ways.

The first way is reflected Peter's concern in the passage we read this morning, that our Christian character won't be able

endure in unjust stations in life, where we may not have the freedom to pursue individual self-fulfillment, and more significantly it won't be able to endure the suffering and persecution we will inevitably face for doing what is right according to God.

You see friends, if you are part of the Covenant people of God then you are marked as different. You are peculiar, you are not like the people who are outside God's covenant because your life is set apart, consecrated, it is holy.

And if you were previously outside of God's covenant but have recently been grafted into it through Jesus Christ – as the recipients of Peter's letter were – then people will have seen a drastic change take place in your life with regards to how you live and what you will no longer do or participate in.

This is why Peter states that his readers have spent enough time *“living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.”* (vs. 3)

Now, because they are included in God's covenant, their lifestyle changes and they no longer join in with their society in idol worship and reckless and wild living as they used to.

But- this change and refusal to participate does not go unnoticed by their former partners in crime, and it brings retaliation, why?

Well as one of the commentaries I consulted put it *“Silent non-participation in sin often implies condemnation of that sin, and rather than change their ways – unbelievers will slander those who have pained their consciences...”* (Tyndale NT Commentary on 1 Peter pg. 170)

So – to put it quite bluntly friends, without the confident expectation that Christ is coming soon to bring in His Kingdom and make things right in this world, you won't see the purpose or any benefit in suffering for what is right and you give in to societal pressures and go along with the status quo.

But if we have the expectation of Christ's return and we know that those who heap abuse on us *“will have to give account to*

him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.” (vs 5) then we will experience that “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” (Rom 8:18) and we can endure those sufferings, and continue to do what is right according to God and not give in to compromise.

Now the benefit of suffering for doing what is right – is that it makes us finished with doing what is wrong.

For example if your “friends” ridicule you, call you nasty names, and slander your reputation because you refused to give in to the temptation to go and get drunk with them as you used to – and you endure this treatment for some time because staying sober is right and obedient to God...

Why would you then go back after putting up with that suffering to go and get drunk? You’ve faced the worst pressure that will come from stopping it, so you are done with it.

That’s what Peter means when he says “*whoever suffers in the body is done with sin*” (vs. 1)

Instead you will be very aware that however much time you have left before you die or Christ returns, you will want to use it live for God’s will – not evil human desires which you have wasted your life on prior to being included in God’s Covenant through Jesus.

So for the first recipients of Peter’s letter this meant continuing to refuse joining in with their society’s worship of false gods and all the immorality which that entailed.

And later on, down through the ages - as the Christian Church realized that Christ’s return may not occur as quickly as they had first thought it would – then Christians began to stand up and suffer the consequences for speaking out against social injustices and calling upon rulers and governments to change things.

Some of the most notable examples of this in somewhat recent history were the efforts started by William Wilberforce in the 1700's to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union of the 1800's advocating for women in America to have the right to vote.

In both cases Christians called for a change to the status quo because neither slavery, nor denying women the opportunity to participate as equal partners in gov't, was something that represented or reflected well the coming Kingdom of God at the return of Christ.

Many Christians endured abuse and persecution and suffering for standing up and calling for society to end these practices, and if our Lord had returned at that time... He would not have found his servants asleep at their posts – but busy at work, attempting to put the Lord's house in order as He might want to find it upon coming home.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of keeping this kind of mindset as our motivation

for our Christian living and as the foundation of our social justice.

Otherwise, and this is the second way we can encounter problems, we will confuse being a Christian with someone who is moral and does good things in this world to “make a difference,” or we will mistake a follower of Jesus with someone who does good things for other people because they have “love” for ALL their fellow human beings...

You see both of these people first and foremost are motivated by a **humanistic** pride in our **human** ability to make the world a better place – as we would define that, and what they claim to have as “love” is nothing more than their adoration of “humanity as divine” and the potential which they see in others to manifest this divinity.

And this is problematic because we will get caught up and swept along with their vision, which conflicts with and is at odds with God's intentions and purposes for His creation.

In contrast, as a disciple and follower of Jesus Christ we must maintain that commitment to being alert and watching for His sudden and unexpected return where He will bring in His Kingdom and establish His Justice.

And until then we keep ourselves busy at the task of working to arrange this world in the manner He would approve of which best anticipates His Kingdom – not the utopian society of humanism.

Do you see the difference? And do you see how easy it can be to get caught up in working towards a utopia instead of anticipating Christ's kingdom?

So brothers and sisters in Christ – this morning the Apostle Peter's letter says to Christians in our age; *"you have spent enough time in the past doing what unbelievers choose to do-adoring humanity as god and calling this idolatry love and proclaiming that #lovewins! Pursuing so called 'social justice issues' for these reasons and motivating people to go and 'make a difference' and change the world accordingly."*

It is time to turn away from that. That's false, it does not represent the Kingdom of God or the Spirit of Christ, and in fact... it's a manifestation of the spirit of the antichrist! (1 John 4:3)

Strong words – yes! And we need to prepare ourselves to suffer abuse and scorn for stating this. There will be those who are surprised that we no longer join them in this sinful way of life.

Instead as followers of Christ we must work to stand out from the crowd of do-gooders, and clearly proclaim that our world's only hope is in the return of Jesus Christ.

And we must ensure that any efforts on our part to address injustice, correct oppression, steward the environment are all done in anticipation of the end of all things, when Christ will return to judge the living and dead, and establish the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Because if we suffer for doing what is right in these matters – we will be done with the sin of thinking and living as humanists – and to paraphrase Peter *“we will live the rest of our earthly lives not for humanistic desires, but rather for the will of God.”* (vs 2)

So we will be alert and sober, and pray as Peter instructs us to in vs. 7 and we pray as our Lord taught us to; *“Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth.... as it is in heaven.”* (Mat 6:10)

Brothers and sisters in Christ – this is what our Christian character needs to mature into, this is what it must be about – and if it is... then we are ready to talk about love and the emphasis Peter puts on loving one another deeply in vs. 8. Because then we will be able to identify when we are dealing with real love.

We will come to recognize God’s **Agape** for his creation - His sacrificial benevolence for that which does not deserve it or fully appreciate it... for the human beings whom He made in

His image in order to redeem and transform them into who he has designed them to be.

And we will know when are dealing with counterfeit love, that humanistic adoration of humanity as divine, which is the driving force behind many so-called social justice issues today, that are really just prideful and rebellion expressions of human self-determination.

And we will see the difference in that God’s sacrificial **Agape** sent His Word from Heaven to earth, incarnate as Jesus Christ, whom Peter points out suffered, out of **Agape**, in order for human nature to be done with sin.

God’s Agape had Jesus pay for our sin by shedding his blood on the cross, through taking the penalty of death for it on himself, suffering through it and defeating it, making a new and sinless life.

So that when we hear Peter exhorting us to love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins – we

understand that we are to *“Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”* (Col 3:13)

That is the love, the agape, that covers a multitude of sins... that is God’s Love. And we must be prepared brothers and sisters to suffer abuse for living and doing right in our society and for our society according to it – which if God’s Agape has shaped our character, and we continue to expect the return of Jesus Christ - we will.

As Jesus himself says *“love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”* (Matt 5:44)

Thus Peter gives us some concrete examples of what loving each other deeply looks like – which we can also apply to loving those who persecute us for our refusal to participate in their humanistic love for others.

Instead we can offer hospitality to one another without grumbling... especially to those who slander us with accusations of hatred.

And we should continue to use the spiritual gifts we have received in Christ from the Holy Spirit to serve others... even those who heap abuse on us.

Why? Because in doing so Peter emphasizes that we will be faithful stewards of **God’s** grace – which will counter and show up the limits of their humanistic ability.

We will speak God’s words which will bring truth and clarity – not vague humanistic truisms that confuse right and wrong.

And we will endure this serving in suffering through God’s strength – which will outlast humanistic efforts every time.

And when the end come and Christ returns, to find us busy working out of God’s agape love to reform our lives, our cities, our societies, our world in a manner that reflects God’s

Kingdom – it will be God who is praised through Jesus Christ – not prideful humanity.

So let us give glory to Jesus Christ until He returns by cooperating with the Holy Spirit work in our hearts and loving each other and those who heap abuse on us deeply.

Loving with God's agape embodied in how Christ was willing to suffer for us – that our character might be done with sin and be willing to suffer for others so they may know that love as well.

Amen.