

Love One-Another Deeply
1 Peter 4:1-11

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this morning we have our last message in our series on Forging Christian Character. Over the past three weeks we've looked at being humble, holding each other accountable, and also the importance of teaching Christian character as part of how we bear witness to the power of the gospel.

And while today's message is based on our scripture reading from 1 Peter 4, I want to refer back to the scripture passage from last week in Titus 2 – and if you remember Paul had a lot to say about how various members of the Cretan household needed to conduct themselves as Christians, and what He had to say to those who held positions as young wives and servants or slaves within the household are challenging for us to hear.

And while I explained and address the historical context of that last week and how it speaks to our current contemporary context, and we acknowledge how hearing the scriptures

exhort us to endure our station in life as a wife, or 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 – in whatever station we may find ourselves - for the sake of witnessing to the power of the gospel – as opposed to pursuing justice or self-fulfillment. It's not to say that justice or self-fulfillment are wrong in any way – its just that we've become so much more enamored with the gospel that justice and self-fulfillment pale in comparison

However - as I said there is a bit more than needs to be discussed on this matter because this reality of bearing witness to the power of the Gospel 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 and other patriarchal offences.

However, such abusive statements about the scriptures do not come from people who really know and understand the scriptures, and it's not just because such accusations occur from taking a text out of context.

Those who know the New Testament well know that the apostles and the early church had an awareness and an expectation that Jesus Christ was coming back within their lifetime.

In Phil 4:5, Paul write *"Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near."*

And James writes in his letter in 5:8 *"You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near..."*

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 and their leaders expected Jesus to return during their lifetime to bring in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

And according to the prophet Isaiah when the new creation was established *"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. They merely had to endure for a little while longer until Christ returned.

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 Christians 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 meantime.

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 – the truth is that 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)

The truth is that the Lord's return 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)

So, the question we need to ask ourselves this morning brothers and sisters - as we clear up any misunderstanding about the gospel being misused to justify oppression and injustice – is not whether we're "woke" to the issues of our day and trying to do something about it...

But rather - is it a part of our Christian character to be alert and watchful? Are we living with the expectation that the return of our Lord Jesus is near and can come suddenly and unexpectedly – and catch up unprepared, especially if we 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 or it’s a loooooong way off - then it creates problems for us in three ways.

First, our character can change so that we misuse and abuse our position of spiritual authority as a Church. Jesus describes how this can happen in Mathew 24:48- 51.

“⁴⁸ But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is staying away a long time,’⁴⁹ and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. ⁵⁰ The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. ⁵¹ He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Let us be honest and acknowledge that such failures as we are being reminded of with the confirmation of unmarked and mass graves at Residential school locations start because those in spiritual and political authority no longer truly believe or conduct themselves like Christ is coming soon and will hold them to account for how they have exercised their authority.

Imagine how different things could be right now if the character of those who ran the residential schools expected the Lord to return and inspect what they were doing there?

We would have a completely different reality in Canada right now if that were the case. However - that was then, this is now and the question is whether we believe someone is coming back soon and what we will give account for on how we used our authority to respond to this terrible tragedy.

Now, moving on from that example and issue the second way that disbelief in Christ's return causes problems 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, and especially as our society and leaders will put forward various responses and solutions to deal with the legacy of the residential schools.

If we do not keep this mindset as Christian this will lead us into the third way we encounter problems from a lack of expectation around Christ's return.

We begin to confuse being a Christian with being someone who is moral and does good things in this world to “make a difference. ” We will mistakenly identify those who do good things for other people because they have “love” for ALL their fellow human beings as followers of Jesus Christ.

And this is problematic because a moral person or someone who has “love” for their fellow human beings are 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 their understanding and definition of “love” is nothing more than their adoration of “humanity as divine” and their admiration of potential which they see in others to manifest this divinity.

And if we confuse this with Christianity or following Jesus 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 and what He will eventually establish in His Kingdom when Christ returns.

By contract, as disciples and followers of Jesus Christ our primary commitment is not to the goodness of humanity, or our potential or being moral, but being loyal and faithful and alert and watching for the sudden and unexpected return of Christ or Lord - when He will bring in His Kingdom and establish His Justice.

And with that in mind, our activity in this world with which we keep ourselves busy – is not trying to “make a difference” but working to arrange this world in a way our Lord would approve of when He return, and which best anticipates His Kingdom – and that is 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? And that’s the challenging part of how to respond to something like the residential schools tragedy – being faithful to respond in a way that reflects the coming Kingdom and not in a way that comes out of a humanistic guilt and shame of how we’ve failed to achieve our utopian ideals.

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 the power of the gospel and that our world's only hope is in the return of Jesus Christ, and encourage people to anticipate the Kingdom in its fullness.

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.

And if we suffer for doing what is right in these matters – we will be done with the sin of thinking and living as humanists – or progressives, or woke-people or however else we might describe that. So, to paraphrase Peter in his letter *"we will live the rest of our earthly lives not for humanistic desires, but rather for the will of God."* (vs 2)

Brothers and sister let us 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)

This is what our Christian character needs to mature into, this is what it must be about – and if it is...

then we are finally ready to talk about love. So, let's look at 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 – **agape** as the Greek text is written.

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, or progressive adoration of humanity as divine, which is the driving force behind many so-called social justice issues today, which look good on the surface but underneath are really just prideful and rebellious expressions of human self-determination and human justice.

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 this means 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)

This is the love, the agape, that covers a multitude of sins... that is God's Love, its what we must mean when we use the English word Love.

And we must be prepared brothers and sisters to suffer abuse for explain this, clarifying this and living and doing right in our society and for our society according to this – which if God's Agape has shaped our character and we continue to expect the return of Jesus Christ - we will do so gladly because it confirms we truly know Love – Agape.

Remember Jesus said *“agape your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”* (Matt 5:44)

So let’s wrap this up with 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.

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 must continue 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 comes and Christ returns, He will 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 and anticipates God’s coming 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 co-operating 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 Agape love as well.

Amen.