

The Christian's Duty in a Hostile World, Part 2

Scripture: 1 Peter 4:7b-9

Code: 60-42

In our study of the Word of God together, we are going through the great text of 1 Peter. And so, I invite you to take your Bible with me and turn to 1 Peter chapter 4, and we are looking again at verses 7 through 11 and considering the theme, "Christian Duty in a Hostile World." Last Lord's day we began to look at this text. We shall continue to endeavor to unfold its truths next Lord's day, and so we find ourselves somewhat in the middle of this wonderful portion of Scripture. Before we dig into the text at hand, let me try to introduce the theme by referring to yet another text taken from the Gospel of Luke, the words of Jesus chapter 14 and verse 26. "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers, and sisters; yes and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which one of you when he wants to build a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king when he sets out to meet another king in battle will not first sit down and take counsel whether he is strong enough with 10,000 men to encounter the one coming against him with 20,000? Or else, while the other is still far away he sends a delegation and asks terms of peace? So, therefore no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions."

Without going deeply into that particular text and reserving such depth for another occasion, at least we can discern from that text that no one should become a follower of Jesus Christ without counting the cost. And, it is apparent from that text that the implication is the cost is very high. Being an authentic Christian demands a willingness to pay the price. And when we talk about being a disciple of Jesus Christ, it is with that in mind. We need to encourage people to count the cost, to measure the price, to consider what it is that Christ asks of us. It is costly to follow Jesus Christ. We remember in the parable of the treasure in the field and the parable of the pearl of great price that in each case it says the man sold all that he had to purchase the treasure, or the pearl. In the case of the rich young ruler, Jesus asked him to take everything he possessed, sell it, take his money, give it to the poor and then follow Him. Jesus told some would-be disciples that He expected them to drop everything and immediately follow Him at the cost of whatever other enterprises they might have involved themselves in. They were reluctant and said they had to do things like take care of family affairs, bury my father, and so forth. Jesus also confronting those who became His disciples simply said to them, "Drop your nets and follow Me, give up your way of life, the matters of your life in exchange for following Me." We will not argue the costliness of salvation any further. But what I would like to remind you of is a truth

that was articulated at least once by a man by the name of Soren Kierkegaard, a philosopher, who said this: "It costs a man even more to go to hell."

Proverbs 13:15 puts it this way, "The way of the transgressor is hard." The way of the disciple may be costly but the way of the disciple is not hard, for Jesus said, "Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is," what? "Easy, and My burden is light." The real price is paid by the one who will not pay the price of discipleship. The hardness belongs to the way of the transgressor. And all of Scripture, and all of human experience merely records the reality of that fact. To reject righteousness, to reject salvation, to reject being a disciple of Jesus Christ is to choose the hardest way: a life of crushing guilt, a life of unanswerable questions, a life of hopeless disappointment, a life of endless and unsolvable problems; and after all of that, to spend forever in hell. And so, we should conclude and be reminded, I think, regularly that though the cost of discipleship is high and though it demands a willingness to give up all we are to follow Christ, it is small when compared to the high cost of refusing to become a follower of Jesus Christ.

To follow Jesus Christ is costly, but easy, and that is the wondrous paradox of discipleship. In fact in 1 John 5:3 John even reminds us that His commandments are not burdensome. We are called to follow Christ. We are called to be His disciples. We are called as such to obey His commands. We are given clear instruction in the Bible, and we are also given direct enabling power by the Holy Spirit to fulfill those commands. And the result is joy. And if we are willing to obey the foundational doctrines of Christian living in the power of a Spirit-filled life, then we will find the yoke is easy and the burden is light. And so, while we must talk of the cost of discipleship, we must also talk of the ease of discipleship because of the great grace of Christ given in the Spirit.

We live in a complex world. Nobody would argue that. However, contemporary Christianity seems bent on assuming that because the world is complex, the solutions to the problems of Christians are also complex. That, however, is not the case. The yoke is easy, the burden is light, a wayfaring man, though he be a fool, need not err. The wise and the prudent are not privy to this. The common, the ignoble, the base, the weak, the infant know the things of God. The foundations of the Christian life, I believe, are not complex, but simple, direct. And I believe that what Peter shares with us in this text takes us to the simple basic foundational elements of living a Christian life. It is one of those great summary texts which says so much in so few words.

Follow them as I read: "The end of all things is at hand, therefore be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. Above all keep fervent in your love for one another because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, let him speak as it were the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies, so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever, amen."

And so, as we approach this text and we approach, as it were, the ease of discipleship, the easy yoke, the light burden made so by the provision of Christ in His Spirit and through the revelation of His truth, we come to the basics for Christian living, a wonderful summation. But before we look again specifically at that summation, let me encourage you with another sort of introductory thought. I believe that one of the characteristics of the Christian life, one of the manifestations of the new nature, one of the things that is implanted in the heart of a believer is a longing to be what God wants you to be. We find that expressed in Romans chapter 7 as Paul sees sin as something he doesn't want to do, or something he does when he shouldn't do it, or something he doesn't do when he should do it. In other words, there's a sense in which in Romans 7 as Paul chronologues his spiritual experience, we get very clearly the message that he wants to obey the law of God which is holy, just and good. And when he doesn't, it is that infernal flesh that hangs on to his redeemed nature and causes him not to do the things he wants to do and to do the things he wants not to do.

And what I draw from that, among many things, is the fact that there is within the believer a desire for what is right, a longing for what is right, a longing for what is best. We could sum it up by saying believers, by virtue of the new nature, hate sin and love righteousness. Now, that may get clouded because of our fallenness, but that's the basic impulse of the new creation. We want to do what's right. But, beloved, that is not enough. That longing is not enough to bring to fruition what God would desire of us. To assume that it is, is sort of like the child, you know, who decides he wants to be like somebody else.

Maybe he has dreams of being a Major League Baseball player, and so he has his own little bat and he stands in the backyard, and he's got a picture of his baseball hero, and he tries to stand exactly the way that hero stands, and he tries to hold the bat the way that hero holds the bat, and he tries to swing his little bat the way that hero swings his big bat. Or, maybe he has an uncle who is a great medical doctor who has perhaps provided healing for hundreds of people, and this little fellow is enamored with the capability of his uncle and longs someday to be like his uncle. And so he has his own little stethoscope, one that his uncle no longer uses, which he drapes around his neck as he parades around the house and plays doctor. Or, maybe there's that little child who wants to be the great musician and so he squeaks and squawks interminably on a violin that you wish somehow could be destroyed.

I submit to you that wanting that does not get that. Wanting that is not enough. Somehow, that little child has got to begin with the ability or the capability and then pursue an overall life of preparation. During that life, he spends his time and energy building a foundation of habits, of responses, of strengths, of timing, even a memory that will produce the performance of greatness that he wants. But wanting it is not enough. It may be born in the wanting, but it is not come to fulfillment in the wanting. We all know that a successful moment at bat in the crucial time in the World Series that turns the tide and wins and Series, that ability to perform in the crucial moment in the time of crisis

when everything is on the line, is not determined by a strong wish, but depth of preparation. Is that not true? Being able to perform in the moment of crisis in the emergency room when life hangs in the balance and it depends on you to keep the patient alive does not happen by wishing; it happens because of a depth of preparation that has made you ready for the moment of crisis. Being able to stand before that critical audience with an eye to discerning mistakes does not happen by wishing it will happen but by depth of preparation. Yes, a life of preparation.

And I submit to you, beloved, that there are many Christians, maybe most Christians, who have the vision, as it were, because they can see the image of Christ in the Word of God, and they have the desire for spiritual excellence but, listen carefully, have not the daily discipline which is required to produce it. And the wishing will not allow them to meet the moment of crisis. That is why many well-wishing Christians come apart at the seams in the crisis. As they get close to the crisis, they would like to find a shortcut. They would like to get a quick course in spiritual strength as the crisis moment descends. It doesn't happen. The only way the yoke is easy, the only way the burden is light, the only way that you are ready for the crisis is when you have been prepared by the spiritual discipline of walking in obedience to the revealed principles of Christian living. And there are no shortcuts, and there are no quick fixes. In the day-to-day spiritual disciplines are built the strength and the courage and the boldness and the depth that makes us perform in the moment of crisis.

Christians seem very, very hard pressed to learn that you can't have a life out of control, and then when the crisis moment comes, grab control of it and instantaneously live and react like Christ would. You can't do it, if in the rest of your life you're not living as Christ would want you to live. But, it is just that kind of shallow Christianity that feeds the shallowness of our time.

Dallas Willard, writing in a book entitled "The Spirit of the Disciplines" says, and I quote, "The on-the-spot episodes are not the place where we can, even by the grace of God, redirect un-Christlike but engrained tendencies of action toward sudden Christlikeness. Our efforts to take control at that moment will fail so uniformly and so ingloriously that the whole project of following Christ will appear ridiculous to the watching world." End quote. He further says, "Some decades ago there appeared a very successful Christian novel called 'In His Steps,'" which we read recently. "The plot tells of a chain of tragic events that bring the minister of a prosperous church to realize how unlike Christ's life his own life had become. The minister then leads his congregation in a vow not to do anything without first asking them the question 'What would Jesus do in this case?' Now, as the content of the book makes clear, the author took this vow to be the same thing as intending to follow Jesus, to walk precisely in His steps. It is, of course, a novel, but even in real life we would count on significant changes in the lives of earnest Christians who took such a vow just as it happens in that book." Then, he writes this: "But there is a flaw in this thinking. Asking ourselves 'What would Jesus do?' When suddenly in the face of an important situation simply is not an adequate discipline or preparation to enable one to live as Christ lived. It no doubt will do some good, and is certainly better than nothing at all, but that act alone is not sufficient to see us boldly and confidently through a crisis. And we could

easily find ourselves driven to despair over the powerless tension it will put us through.” End quote.

The secret of being ready for the crisis, of having the yoke be easy and the burden be light is to learn how to live the Christian life all the time so that we have developed the habits, the resources, the responses, the timing, the strengths, the memory, the faith, the spiritual courage to handle it. That’s the issue. To behave like Jesus Christ is our goal, but to be able to do that is not the result of wishing. It’s the result of daily spiritual discipline. Jesus said in Luke 6:40, “Only after he is fully trained will a man be like his teacher.”

The novelist, Leo Tolstoy, once wrote, “Man’s whole life is a continual contradiction of what he knows to be his duty. In every department of life he acts in defiant opposition to the dictates of his conscience and his common sense.” End quote. Now, there is a comment on the tragedy of fallen man: he is unable even to do what he in his fallenness thinks is right. It is part of fallen human nature to be debilitated. The only way a Christian, even in his regenerate life, can overcome that impact of fallenness, is by the cultivation of godly habits.

And so, beloved, all of that to say this, what Peter presents here gives us patterns for daily living, summarizing how we are to live as believers.

Three points in the text that I want to draw you to. Last week we looked at point number one, the incentive. The incentive is in verse 7, “the end of all things is at hand.” When he says “end,” *telos*, he does not mean the cessation. It is not a chronological idea. He doesn’t mean the termination. He means the consummation, the reaching of the goal, the achievement, the purposed realized, destiny is fulfilled. And I believe he has in mind the return of Jesus Christ. The incentive for holy living is to live in constant expectancy of Christ’s sudden return. We spent all last Sunday night on that alone.

Let’s go to the second point, from the incentive then come the instructions. Verses 7b through the first part of verse 11 give us the instructions for godly living: how to conduct your life on a day to day basis so that you build the kind of habits that will stand you strong in the crisis. How to live the kind of life that though the cost of discipleship be high will cause you to say the yoke is easy and the burden is light, that will cause you to say the commandments of God are not burdensome. Here are the patterns of life that must be established.

They fall into three categories: personal holiness, love, and service. Those are the three dimensions on which we concentrate in our Christian living. The first, personal holiness, has to do with our relationship to God and His revealed Word. The second, love, has to do with our relationship to others. The third, service, again, expresses responsibility to fulfill God’s plan for us in terms of ministry within the body of Christ: holiness, love and service.

Let's talk about holiness. Notice verse 7, "Therefore," he says, "because the end of all things is near, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer." This really does sum up holiness. Sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer would mean that my life is so pure and so right that my communion with the living holy God is unhindered. What about that statement, "be of sound judgment?" The term comes from a word that means to save, and a word that has to do with the mind. And I suppose we could extrapolate from that that the basic idea is to keep your mind safe. Save your mind, guard it, protect it, keep it clear. Another way to put that would be to fix it on spiritual priorities, fix it on holy things. To borrow Paul's statement to the Colossians, "Set your affections on things above and not on things on the earth." It also could imply here not to be swept away by emotion, not to be swept away by passion. That could be part of it. It is the same word used in Mark 5:15 where it talks about the maniac, you remember, whom Jesus delivered from the legion of demons, and it says he was clothed and in his right mind. Same term. It is used in Romans 12:3, "We are not to think more highly than we ought to think but to think sanely, to think soundly, to bring our mind, as it were, captive to divine truth."

And everything proceeds out of the mind. The Bible says, "As a man thinks, so he acts." A sound mind, sound judgment is reflective of a holy orientation. The sinful, self-indulgent, deceiving demonically influenced world in which we live is a very easy place to lose your spiritual mindedness, is it not? It's a great place to lose your mental and moral balance. And so, Peter says be spiritually sane. What do you mean? Think on God, think on spiritual things, think on holy things, think God's thoughts. It takes me way back to a verse I learned as a little boy, Joshua 1:8. "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth but you shall meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it, for then you will make your way prosperous and then you will have success." From the very beginning, way back at the start God said you must think on My Word.

In Philippians, as we have studied through that marvelous epistle which we concluded this morning, we remember well, I know, chapter 4 verse 8, "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things." Saving your mind, keeping it sane, holding on to it is vital to Christian holiness. Colossians 3:16 gives us another insight into that, it says, "Let the Word of Christ," do what? "Dwell in you richly." That guards the mind, protects the mind, keeps the mind focused on pure things. Paul writing to Titus reminds us that the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all men and with it instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in this present age.

Dear people, you must bring your mind captive to Christ, to the Word of God. The great characteristic of sound judgment, the great characteristic of a spiritually sane mind, is that it sees things in their proper proportions, their proper priorities, their proper perspectives. It sees what is important. It sees what is not important. It isn't swept away by sudden emotion. It isn't swept away by changing fancies. It is not unbalanced fanaticism. It is not foolish indifference. And, beloved, the only people who have

this kind of sound judgment are those whose mind, as the song writer said, is stayed on Thee. This is a poised, this is a balanced Christian.

Other forms of this word appear in the New Testament. One in 1 Timothy 3:2 is translated “sensible,” or “prudent.” Another in 2 Timothy 1:7 is translated with the word “discipline,” or “self-control.” Another in Titus 2:2, again “sensible.” And it’s used three or four times I remember in that one chapter; having a sensible, disciplined, prudent, self-controlled mind. All of these usages of this term and its various related terms carry the idea of balanced discipline, here it comes, self-controlled thinking; or better: God-controlled thinking. This insulates the believer from being victimized by temptation and leads him to personal holiness, and when that becomes the pattern of daily living in the moment of crisis, there is Christ likeness. The mind is the key.

Peter is not done with just that. Look again at verse 7. He says, “Be of sound judgment,” and then adds, “and sober spirit.” And this is a synonym or very close to a synonym. It means basically to keep a clear head, to take serious things seriously, to be vigilant, to be alert. In Matthew 24:42, it’s translated “Be on the alert.” Matthew 26:40 and 41, “Be watching.” You might combine these two terms by putting it this way: good, clear, godly, biblical thinking leads to spiritual alertness, spiritual watchfulness. It leads to the ability to view things in the eternal perspective, in the divine perspective, and to establish right responses.

This is indispensable, and it is indispensable to one very, very essential element of Christian living that is noted in verse 7. Please come to the climax of the thought. Sound judgment and sober spirit are for the purpose of prayer. Why? Because holiness flows out of direct communion with a holy God. And when that communion is hindered by a cluttered mind, an imbalanced mind, that which is most significant in Christian experience is lost. A confused mind, a self-centered mind, a mind knocked out of balance by worldly lusts and pursuits, a mind victimized by emotion or passion out of control, a mind that is ignorant of God’s truth, a mind that is indifferent to God’s purposes is a mind that cannot know the fullness of holy communion in prayer with God. After all, you bring your mind to that communion, don’t you? And so, your relationship to God, in a very real sense which is expressed in this matter of prayer, is determined by the attitudes that you bring, which attitudes are the result of your thinking. And if you are to pray effectively, and if you are to commune with God deeply and spiritually, then you must think biblically and spiritually as well.

Beloved, this is so basic to us. So, many Christians today, you know this as well as I do, are dazzled by the world’s fantasies, swept up and befuddled by all of its ideas. Their thinking is out of whack. They are victimized by Satan’s endless smoke screens. And as a result, their communion with God is just warped, hindered, or lost. And with it, the power of prayer and a powerful life. Peter is greatly concerned about this matter of prayer. Not just here, but do you remember chapter 3 verse 7 where he said you better get your marriage together so your prayers aren’t hindered? To Peter, this communing with God was of central importance. By the way, the term “prayer” is plural in the Greek

text, and indicates a repeated pattern of life.

Peter was a good illustration of a man who experienced a less than acceptable prayer life. If you read Mark 14:37 to 40, you'll read about it. He tended to trade sleep for prayer, if you'll remember. Prayer is the heart of our life, the heart of our power. And I don't mean a formal prayer, I mean that unending living communion with God, which is born out of thinking God's thoughts. You know, I find, just as a personal illustration, I find when I am deeply involved in the study of the Word of God, and my mind is just searching deeply through and sorting out great truths about God in the times of study, that there is a flow of communion that is inexplicable because I am touching the mind of God if ever so lightly. I am touching the heart of God. And even with an unspoken communion, there is a sense of overwhelming presence. That only comes in those moments when our minds are making sound judgments and treating divine truth soberly, alertly. Then, communion really flows.

I'll tell you, people say to me this all the time when I go to pastors conferences, every time we have one someone, well, maybe a few exceptions, I shouldn't say every time. But, rarely is it not the occasion when they don't ask me, "Describe something about your prayer life, something about your prayer experience." To which I will inevitably reply, "The times of greatest communion with God for me are the times when I am thinking most deeply the thoughts of God." I link with Him. And so, the more I have the mind of Christ, the sweeter the communion will be; the more often my thoughts are God's thoughts, the more frequently I'm in His fellowship.

So, says Peter, the Christian life summed up is as simple as this: think God's thoughts. What does that mean? That means every day in the Word of God, every day meditating, thinking, absorbing, drawing out, learning to think God's thoughts. As I often say, it should come to pass that you are so deeply filled with Scripture, that your involuntary responses are godly because you're so controlled. And then, comes the sweetness of communion, then comes effective prayer, then comes power. That's the vertical link in Christian living.

And then again, with the genius of the Holy Spirit, we come to the horizontal link. The second area which is of concern to Peter in this matter of instruction has to do with love. I don't suppose much more can be said about love that hasn't been said 1,000 fold, and I don't want to beg the issue, but I do want to emphasize what Peter says. Look at verse 8, "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint." Here, Peter turns from the vertical aspect of living a holy life before God to the horizontal aspect of living a loving life before men. And he's primarily concerned about relationships with other Christians. You say, "Well, isn't he concerned about evangelism?" Yes, but you remember the words of Jesus that if we love one another, by this shall all men know that we are His what? Disciples; that is the substance of our witness.

And so, Peter introduces us again to this matter of loving. It is an essential word for us, and notice the importance he gives it. In verse 8 he says, "Above all," first in importance, in terms of relationships is love. After you have strengthened your relationship with the Lord through developing intense times of study of the Word of God, and communion with the Lord so you think with a biblical mind, and a spiritual attitude and you have a flowing prayer life with God that readies you for any crisis, then your first concern should be to turn to those around you and keep fervent in your love for one another.

There's tremendous richness in this term. It sounds very much like Paul's words in Colossians 3:14, "Above all things put on love which is the perfect bond of unity." Paul in Philippians 2 says, "Love everybody the same." The verb here, by the way, is a participle, and modifies the verbs of verse 7. It's as if to say that if you're sound in mind, and sober in spirit, and having sweet communion with God, then as you look where that ought to flow, the first thing should be that you keep your love fervent. This is a corollary to a biblical balanced mind and spirit. I love the word "fervent," *ektens*, because it's an anatomical word. It means to be stretched, to be strained. It is used of a runner who is running at maximum output with taut muscles straining and stretching to the limit. It is used in some extra-biblical literature of a horse straining the great muscles in running full speed. It means intense, strenuous, reaching as far as you can reach to the limit of your capacity.

This is not, by the way, the first time Peter uses this. Back in chapter 1, do you remember verse 22? "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren," in other words, since you've become a Christian and since being a Christian means you love the brethren, "fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again," he says. It's as if he's saying: now that you're a Christian and have been born again, the obvious reaction is to love one another, and to love one another not complacently, not marginally, not minimally, but stretched and strained, intensely. This is a fundamental Christian truth. He is not calling for a mushy kind of sentimentalism which some used to call "sloppy *agap*." He's talking about a demanding love. He's talking about an intense love. He's talking about a sacrificial love.

You say, "Well, how do I stretch? How do I get intense? How do I strain?" And the answer is by crossing the barriers of human emotion. That is to say, loving the unlovely, the unlovable, loving your enemies, loving those who have not treated you kindly, loving when it doesn't seem rational, doesn't seem reasonable, loving to the point of sacrifice that it costs you something, costs you much, maybe costs you everything. The kind of love that requires all your spiritual muscle, stretching to love the unlovable in spite of insult, in spite of injury, in spite of being rejected, in spite of being treated unkindly, ungraciously, in spite of being treated with hostility, in spite of being misjudged, mistreated and misrepresented.

That's fervent love. It's the kind of love that's, I think, wonderfully defined in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. We all know that great text, but let me remind you. "Love is patient, love is kind, is not jealous, love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly, it does not seek its own, is not

provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things and never fails." It can take anything, from anybody, anytime. It believes the best. It hopes for the best. It endures the worst.

And why should we love each other this way? I'll tell you why. Listen very carefully. Verse 8, "Because love covers a multitude of sins." And I'll tell you, beloved, if as a church, we ever get to the place where we're running around poking at each other because of our sins, we're shattered. We are not perfect, and as long as we're in this fallen flesh, we will sin. And the only thing that is going to ride over the top of that and keep us together is love. Love is always hiding, *kalupt*. Love is always hiding a multitude of sins, that is its character. To put it simply, love forgives, and forgives, and forgives, and forgives, and forgives. And if we don't have that in the church, we're in real trouble.

Peter, thinking himself to have arrived at the point of spiritual maturity and to be more magnanimous than anybody he could imagine, said to the Lord, "How many times shall we forgive, 7?" And no doubt patted himself on the back for his generosity because the Talmud said 3. Think how far he'd come. And the Lord said, "Peter, how about 70 times 7?" Because love covers a multitude of sins and, beloved, we're sinners and we've got to have something to cover that, right? By the way, that statement Peter borrowed. He borrowed it from Proverbs 10:12. "Hatred stirs up strife but love covers all sins." Present tense here, I think, indicates that which is constantly true. It is axiomatic. It is a self-evident truth. Love is always by very nature hiding a multitude of sins. It forgives, and forgives, and forgives, and forgives, and the great, great model of that is God. Why did God show mercy to us? Why did God forgive our sins? Ephesians 2:4 and 5 says, "For His great love where with He loved us." It's true of God, it's true of us.

Commentators through the years have battled with that statement: "Love covers a multitude of sins." And some have said it's referring to God, and God's love covering our sin. And others have said, "No, it's referring to us, us covering each other's sins because we love each other." And, I believe the answer is very simple. It's an axiom. It just refers to love, true *agap*, true willful, spiritual love. Whether from God to man or Christian to Christian is going to cover sin, it's axiomatic, it's self-evident, it's the nature of that love. And the only way we could be saved is because God so loved the world. And only love could cover our sins. And while we were yet sinners, Paul says to the Romans, Christ died for us. Why? Because He loved us. And it's only as we love one another that we can cover sins.

Beloved, this is the heart of the church. To be honest with you, if we take care of this, we've fulfilled the whole law. Is that not true? The whole law. You can see again the genius of the Spirit of God, how in an economy of words He says so much. You want to take care of the whole dimension of living before God? Get a biblical mind, a spiritual mind, be deep in communion with Christ and you'll have a powerful life. You want to know how to function in the complexity of the church? Just be so full of overflowing love that you cover sin. This does not preclude, by the way, the discipline of an

unrepentant member. That is dealt with in other texts. But even in the church, we are much more eager, I think, to point out sin than we are to cover it. Hatred will stir up strife. Selfishness will stir up strife. Self-centeredness will stir up strife. Love will hide sin. Love will conceal it. Love will pass it by in silence. And what a transformation that would bring to the church. It is that which is at the very base of all our spiritual relationships. It is a complex world, isn't it? But there are not complex solutions, simple ones. Not simply performed, simply stated, performed only in the power of the Spirit.

Peter goes one step further in this matter of love. In verse 9, he says, "Be hospitable to one another without complaint." The word here means to love strangers. He has to add this because we tend to be lovers of our friends, and we tend to readily cover the sins of our friends. And he says, "Would you please extend that to strangers? Will you be affectionate toward strangers?" He has here, I'm sure, a spiritual kind of love that covers. More than that, he also has in mind the opening of our hearts and our homes for those in need, for love is intensely practical. And if all there was was verse 8, we might assume that this was just some emotional feeling, and so he brings it down to a very pragmatic level.

And when he uses the term "hospitality," he's simply saying love strangers in a practical way. Most have associated this word with opening the home. Everybody who studies New Testament background understands the traveling Christians, traveling ministers and preachers couldn't stay in the inns of those days, which were a little more than houses of ill repute. The early Christians probably couldn't have existed if there wasn't the hospitality that was offered by the church. But there's more to it than that. Certainly that's part of it. Open your home, embrace someone. And I love what it says in Hebrews, "Be careful how you treat a stranger, you might be dealing with an angel," reminiscent of way back in Genesis when God and a couple of angels visited Abraham and Sarah. Hospitality was commanded in Exodus 22:21, Deuteronomy 14:28 and 29. Certainly, Jesus emphasized giving a cup of cold water to the least of His in His name. And certainly in Luke 14, you have the call of Christ to go out into the highways and call the poor and the blind and the lame and bring them into your home and feed them. And God certainly honors those kinds of sacrifices.

But, the whole spirit of this is bigger than just providing a meal and opening a door; it's embracing the fact that we are to love people outside our normal circle, and to do it without grumbling, without murmuring, without grudging, without what I call the Poor Richard's Almanac mentality. Poor Richard's Almanac says, "Fish and visitors smell in three days." There is to be a generous hospitality toward those we don't know, an opening of our heart to them.

What, then, is the Christian's duty in a hostile world? It is to pursue holiness with God, to pursue love with others so that we cover their sins, so that we meet their needs, be they friend or stranger. The final area of duty, we leave for next time. Let's bow together in prayer.

Father, we thank You again tonight for this great word to us. And Lord, we want to be not like the little boy who wishes to be someone, and assumes that maybe by wishing it will come to pass. May we

have more mature thoughts than that, to know that it starts with the wishing. It comes to fruition through the matter of pursuing daily the commands that You have laid for us. May we know that the only way we're ready for the crisis, the only way the yoke becomes easy, and the burden is light, the only way the high cost of discipleship can become joyous is when we are prepared to face the inevitable hour of trial which tests our faith. And so, help us, Lord, to pursue holiness, to pursue love as we have been instructed, that we might truly, faithfully fulfill that calling to which we have been called. And we praise You for the enabling grace of the Spirit of God in Your Son's name. Amen.

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