

God-Shaped Community

1 Peter 4:7-11

We kick off the new year with a topical sermon series, on what used to be called, 'stewardship'. Given that we rarely have 'stewards' today, a more contemporary metaphor might be 'manager' or 'investment banker'. God has given each of us particular assets to manage, and we are commissioned to provide a return on his investment. The beginning of the year – and the common habit of making New Year resolutions – provides an appropriate opportunity to review God's portfolio invested under our management, our progress in securing a return on his investment, and any changes we might need to make to our investment strategy.

Day 1: 1 Peter 4:7 'The end is near' ... or is it?

Several times in the New Testament, biblical authors anticipate that the end of time will come soon. This is one of the most perplexing assertions for many Christians: two thousand years have since passed; isn't this an obvious example of error in the Bible? If the Bible is wrong here, where else might it be wrong? Where can it be trusted?

Actually, this confusion is based on a misunderstanding or ignorance of the biblical time-line. Scripture breaks time down into distinct periods which follow each other in linear progression: (a) the time before creation, (b) the creation of Adam, (c) Noah and the flood, (d) Abraham and the patriarchs, (e) national Israel, (f) exile, (g) return from exile leading to the final age. The point of the New Testament is that we are in period (g). This period has more subsets than the Old Testament realized: (g^1) the first coming of Christ, (g^2) an intermediate period of indeterminate length, (g^3) the second coming of Christ, final judgment, culminating in an eternity in heaven or hell.

So when the New Testament authors assert that 'the time is near', what they have in mind is that the final period of time (g) has begun with the incarnation, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ. They did not know how long this period might last, nor do we. What we do know is that there are no more time periods to come, that Jesus could return at any time. In career terms, we are in the last phase of our working life; while our retirement date is not yet set, it is fast approaching: how can we make the most impact in this last phase of our career? In student terms, the end of the semester has come; while the schedule of exams has not yet been released, finals week is upon us: we must make the best use of our remaining time.

Similarly, Peter urges his readers – and us – to focus: "Be clear-minded and self-controlled". The time is passed for partying, for sleeping in, for ignoring

long-term deadlines, for chilling out, for relaxing instead of working, for watching t.v. rather than being productive. Now is the time to concentrate, to focus, to be intentional. Are you intentional about how you serve God with your time, energy and resources? Or have you slipped into a routine, without much sense of how you can best serve God in your current context?

Day 2: 1 Peter 4:8-10 Not Just 'One Another'

This passage focuses on our relationships with 'one another' (4:8,9,10). But we should not conclude from this emphasis on relationships within the church that God disregards relationships with those outside the church.

In the preceding section, 2:11-4:6, the apostle Peter focuses on our relationships with those outside the church. He begins in 2:11, with our characterization as aliens and strangers, foreigners and immigrants, in this world. As outsiders, we may be misunderstood or criticized. To deflect that, Peter urges that our lives be exemplary (2:12). Then he spells out what that looks like in various contexts: it entails submission to authority, whether of citizens to government, 2:13-17), of slaves to masters (2:18-25), or of wives to husbands (3:1-7); it entails suffering without seeking retribution (3:8-22); it entails holy living, and turning away from past dissipations (4:1-6).

In all these respects, Christ is our model of proper living. He suffered unjustly for us, so Christian slaves may be required to suffer unjustly for him (2:21-25). He suffered for doing good, rather than for doing evil, so his followers may be called upon to do likewise (3:17-18). He suffered, and then died to sin; so we should die to sin, and live for the will of God (4:1-6). In short, our relationship with the world around us matters to Christ, and should be modeled on his relationship with the world.

Day 3: 1 Peter 4:8-10 'One another'

Christian community is the focus of this passage. In this regard, Scripture stands at considerable odds with American culture. American culture is famously individualistic. Faith is about me and God: *I* pray to receive Christ; *I* give my life to Christ; *I* decide to follow Jesus. Sure, I may go to church, but I choose one that meets *my* needs (rather than one that needs my ministry), and I leave whenever it no longer meets *my* needs.

Peter's view of church has much more to do with community than with individuality. Sure, conversion is still individual, and personal relationship with God remains crucial. But it is not all that matters. When God calls us to himself, he calls us also to each other. Being a Christian is not just about loving God, it is also about loving one another (4:8). It is not just about enjoying God's blessings, it is also about sharing those blessings with others (4:9). It is

not just about receiving God's grace, it is also about ministering that grace to others (4:10). In a church our size, community life is best expressed in fellowship groups: Do you regularly participate in a fellowship group? As you do so, which predominates in your mind: How much you benefit from it, or how you can benefit others?

Day 4: 1 Peter 4:8 'Love one another resolutely'

This exhortation calls for two comments. First, 'above all': no less than Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, Peter prioritizes love as the chief Christian virtue. Love, not wisdom. Love, not intelligence. Love, not good looks, not popularity, not emotional quotient, not success, not even generosity. Which of these do you most want for yourself (and for your children, if you have them)? Do your values correspond to God's?

Secondly, the love in view is not simply warm feelings. It is steadfast commitment: the Greek word means not 'deeply' so much as 'resolutely'. It is a love which is constant, persistent, determined. Love needs to be constant, persistent, determined, and resolute because Christian community can be challenging. "Love covers a multitude of sins": not your sins, but others' sins against you. To the extent that you form close relationships with other Christians, they will occasionally disappoint or hurt you. You need an extra measure of love if you are going to overlook it. Megachurches can be lonely; it is easy to get lost in a crowd of thousands, to slip in late and slip out early, to attend week after week without every knowing anyone. But megachurches have a corresponding upside: while superficial relationships are much less enriching, they are also much less troublesome.

Our fellowship groups are just the right size both to provide intimacy and to be annoying, to give warmth and also to fuss with each other. We enjoy the warmth, but we grow from the fusses. Only when challenged does love grow. If you are currently annoyed with someone in the congregation or in your fellowship group, what do you plan to do? Ignore them? Leave the group? Or, grow in resolute love toward them?

Day 5: 1 Peter 4:9 'Show hospitality, without grumbling'

This exhortation is amusingly realistic, and poses two challenges. First, it calls us to open our homes to others, something many of us find difficult. Secondly, it calls us to go even further, to do so happily, rather than begrudgingly. Before exploring this further, one distinction is important. Scripture does not call us to *entertain* each other; we need not go to great lengths, to put on elaborate meals, rushing around from this to that, arranging entertainment, and the like. What it calls us to is simple hospitality: inviting others in to enjoy

our homes and share our lives.

Hospitality serves three functions in Scripture. First, and foremost, in Jesus' culture and in his ministry, hospitality – sharing a meal together – signifies acceptance and welcome into the kingdom of God. This is why he ate with 'tax collectors and sinners' (and why religious purists were alarmed). This is why the apostle Paul confronted Peter publicly, insisting that Jewish Christians must eat together with Gentile Christians (Galatians 2:11-21). Eating with people not like us preaches the gospel. Secondly, hospitality was essential for Christian worship. Early Christians worshipped in private homes. They relied on the hospitality of the prosperous home owners (most of the urban working class lived in tenements). Thirdly, hospitality was essential for evangelism and missions. Much of the earliest evangelism and missions came through traveling preachers, but motels and inns were neither widespread nor particularly inviting. So the spread of the gospel depended on Christians giving hospitality to itinerant preachers and missionaries.

We live in a much different world, with hotels and motels dotting the nation's highways, and most of us have enough money to dine out regularly. So hospitality may take different forms today. But the basic point remains the same: *our* homes are not *ours* to own, from which to exclude others; they are venues through which to serve God and one another, and venues into which to welcome newcomers.

Day 6: 1 Peter 4:10-12 'Gifting grace'

We typically think of grace as something God shows us: 'God's riches at Christ's Expense', the forgiveness of sins, and so forth. But here, grace is something that we show each other. The Greek word for 'gift' comes from the same word as 'grace', so Paul intends a pun here: "Just as each of you received grace, grace one another." The grace comes from God, but he allots us to be 'stewards' of grace, to manage grace, to convey grace to others. Peter reinforces the point as he illustrates it: those gifted to speak are speaking God's words; those gifted to serve are serving out of the strength that God supplies. He calls us to be water pipes, not storage tanks, to be channels – not repositories – of grace. We are ministers of God's grace, and conduits of God's kindness, as we serve one another in ministry.

Are you currently engaged in ministry, in serving as a conduit of God's grace to others?

If you are, do you have God's perspective on your ministry, seeing it not as insignificant routine or as obligation, but as God pouring out his grace on others through you and what you do?