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1 Peter 4:7-11

Fifteenth Message

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# FIRST PRIORITIES IN THE LAST DAYS

*SERIES: A PILGRIM'S LIFE IN AN ALIEN LAND*

I was privileged to attend a dinner last week with Dr James Dobson of Focus on the Family as a speaker. He addressed the demise of the American family in the last thirty years and the pressures that our children face in the world today. It is as if an adolescent is forced to walk down a long, dark corridor that has many doors, he said. Behind each of these doors is a monster of addiction that threatens to ruin his life—premarital sex, drugs, pornography, etc. In the old days, society kept the doors locked, so a person had to work on his own to find a key. Now, says Dr Dobson, the doors are not only unlocked, but society has flung them open. As a young person goes through the hallway, he or she is able to look through these doors to see their friends indulging in these perverted activities and beckoning them to join. It is a rare individual who can get through that corridor unscathed.

Dr Dobson was followed by Gary Bauer, a former aide to President Reagan, who is now president of the Family Research Council. He began a ministry in Washington D.C. called the Washington Watch, which reports on the political climate in our nation's capital. He warned that there is a war of values in our nation, and we are rapidly losing that war. American institutions such as the media, government and school systems are no longer guided by Judeo-Christian values, and the only two institutions left, the family and the church, are under severe attack.

Although I came away discouraged by the state of our society, I am grateful that we have people such as these men who are speaking to the crucial issues facing us. Many Christians are asleep. Their children are turned loose, unprepared to walk these corridors, and consequently pay a tremendous price. We must ask hard questions about how we as Christians should respond to this growing threat. What should our priorities be?

In the same way, the apostle Peter exhorted the Christians of his day to set priorities in their daily walk. Writing from Rome, the center of social and political change, he essentially says, "I am doing a political watch. I am taking the empire's temperature toward Christianity." Peter observes that the climate towards Christianity was changing from one of tolerance and openness to an organized hostility against believers. He sees on the horizon dark clouds gathering for a fierce storm to be unleashed against the Christian community. It is so menacing that he tells the brethren, "the end of all things is at hand."

## Understanding the Nature of the Age (4:7a)

**The end of all things is near.**

### A. "The End is Near": The Theological Significance

We must understand this statement on two levels, the theological and historical. Theologically, Jesus taught the disciples that there was a biblical order to salvation history. Referring to the prophets, he showed a certain sequence of events that had to be fulfilled before the Day of Judgment (with all the events that incorporates—the tribulation, etc.). Those events included the coming of Messiah, his crucifixion and resurrection from the dead; the pouring out of the Spirit

upon all nations at Pentecost; and finally the great Day of Judgment. Between Pentecost and the Day of Judgment there are no other events to occur in salvation history. Thus the apostles labeled the present era "the last days" (see Acts 2:17-21), because the next event in history will be the Second Coming—the "end of all things." It is the gift of the Spirit, through the resurrection of Jesus, that has brought the Judgment Day right to the door of history. Therefore, the end is near.

### B. "The End is Near": The Historical Significance

Secondly, Peter attributes historical significance to this statement. Although the government encouraged Christianity at first, the climate had changed at the time of Peter's letter. In A.D. 64 the Christians were so hated in Rome that Nero was able to use them as the scapegoat for a fire he set that destroyed half of Rome. Tacitus, a historian of that time, said of the fire:

...to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled as Christians. Christus, from whom they got their name, had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was emperor; and the pernicious superstition was checked for a short time, only to break out afresh, not only in Judaea, the home of the plague, but in Rome itself, where all the horrible and shameful things in the world collect and find a home.

First, those who confessed themselves Christians were arrested; next, on their disclosures, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much on the charge of arson as for hatred of the human race. And their death was made a matter of sport: they were covered in wild beasts' skins and torn to pieces by dogs; or were fastened to crosses and set on fire in order to serve as torches by night when daylight failed. Nero had offered his garden for the spectacle and gave an exhibition in his circus, mingling with the crowd in the guise of a charioteer or mounted on his chariot.

Nero used the people's common hatred of Christianity and set a precedent for official policy towards them. With this awareness, Peter tells these Christians that the end is coming. In our nation, the end may be near as well. We may be losing this country to corrupt values and philosophies. What can we do?

In Peter's day, Christians facing this question observed how the Jewish community responded to a similar Roman threat towards them. Some Jews, such as the Essenes, isolated themselves in the desert and built their own community as protection. Others, like the Zealots, who were tired of waiting for the Messiah, organized themselves politically and militarily. They gathered arms to fortify Jerusalem and formed guerilla bands to harass the Romans, using outposts like Masada. The Sadducees, on the other hand, were wealthy landowners who got involved in the political process. They became as corrupt as the Roman world around them. Christians faced the same dilemma—how to respond to the situation. They wondered if they should follow suit, or was there another response.

Peter plots a fourth course for them to follow. Because the end is near and we are at the door of history, he tells them to treat these days as a precious time to do God's work on earth. In 1 Peter 4:7-11, the apostle sets four priorities for the last days:

**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.**

## I. Priority #1: The Pilgrim's Mind (4:7b)

**Be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.**

The first priority Peter establishes deals with the mind. Writing these words, the apostle refers to Jesus' words of warning to the disciples regarding an hour of testing: "Be on guard, that your hearts may not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that the day come upon you suddenly like a trap ... But keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:34, 36). To meet the trials that would befall them, Jesus cautioned his disciples not to be drunk with anxiety or fear, but to be sober so they could pray. In prayer, they would escape temptation, and intercede for others as well.

There was a time in Peter's life when he failed to follow this exhortation. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said, "Watch and pray." But, drunk with anxiety, Peter slept when he should have been praying. When the soldiers seized Jesus, Peter was so drunk with anxiety and confusion that he lacked sound judgment. Thinking the Roman soldiers were the enemy, he grabbed a weapon of the world, the sword, and cut off the slave's ear. In the flesh, Peter responded as the world would against the wrong enemy. Later, at Jesus' trial, when Peter was waiting outside, he was given the opportunity to do battle with the spiritual weapon of speech and love to bear witness about the Messiah. Drunk with fear, he again failed when he denied the Lord. Out of this bitter experience Peter teaches that we must guard our mind.

I learned a similar lesson when I was a freshman at Stanford University in the late '60's. Stanford was under siege from the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a political group that organized against the university administration. As an idealistic young Christian opposing this movement, I joined the Young Americans for Freedom and organized counter-demonstrations against the demonstrators. One time, I tried to rally the strongest flesh on campus—members of the fraternities and the football team—to counteract a sit-in we heard was planned. I told them, "There's a war on, and you have to come. We'll stand in front of the building and protest the protest." Not one of them came. I was able to gather only twenty-five freshmen to stand in front of the building. We thought we would be able to stop the onslaught of the SDS, but when we were confronted by five hundred students running at us I was gripped with fear. My friend turned to me and said, "Morgan, if you're scared, you'd better leave!" I left my friends to face the SDS alone, and a riot broke out that resulted in much destruction.

I learned a lesson that day. Like Peter, I accomplished nothing when my response to pressure was to be drunk with anxiety. Instead

of being a man of prayer, I used the weapons of the world to fight an enemy. In contrast, Jesus prayed in the garden and learned that he was to be passive before the enemy at his hour. Later, when the Romans crucified him, he prayed for his enemies' forgiveness. God granted his prayer, and people began to see the King of Kings for who he was. The first pagan to confess Jesus as the King was a Roman soldier who testified, "Truly this was the Son of God" (Matt 27:54).

To illustrate each priority that Peter lists I have brought symbols to remind us of how to handle the last days. A symbol of this first priority is a wonderful gift I received from a Romanian family with whom I stayed the first year I visited that country. It is a needle-point picture of praying hands. I have this next to my bed so when I wake up in the morning I am reminded to be of sober spirit all day so I can pray for people.

## II. Priority #2: The Pilgrim's Heart (4:8)

Now Peter moves from the intellect to talk about the pilgrim's heart. Verse 8:

**Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.**

### A. The Lack of Love in the Roman World

The Roman world was cold, dark and loveless. Historian Philip Schaff wrote:

[S]elfishness was the soul of heathen morality. The great men of antiquity rose above its sordid forms [only by] the power of ambition and love of fame. It was for fame that Miltiades and Themistocles fought against the Persians; that Alexander set out on his tour of conquest; that Herodotus wrote his history, that Pindar sang his odes, that Sophocles composed his tragedies, that Demosthenes delivered his orations, that Phidias sculptured his Zeus. Fame was set forth in the Olympian games as the highest object of life; fame was held up by Aeschylus as the last comfort of the suffering; fame was declared by Cicero, before a large assembly, the ruling passion of the very best of men. Even the much-lauded patriotism of the heroes of ancient Greece and Rome was only an enlarged egotism. In the catalogue of classical virtues we look in vain for the two fundamental and cardinal virtues, love and humility. The very word which corresponds in Greek to humility signifies generally, in classical usage, a mean, abject mind...[F]riendship itself rested, as was freely admitted, on a utilitarian...basis, and was only possible among persons of equal or similar rank in society. For the stranger, the barbarian, and the enemy, the Greek and Roman knew no love, but only contempt and hatred.<sup>1</sup>

Plutarch wrote that even friendship in families had died out. For brothers and sisters to love each other in the same home was thought to be an idealistic virtue of the past. It sounds very much like our world today. In our affluent society, where we are on the cutting edge of intellect and finance, few homes have any evidence of sacrificial love.

### B. The Intensity of Love

**Keep fervent in your love for one another.**

In the context of these end times, Peter says that we must commit ourselves to love in two ways. First, we must keep fervent in our love, which means extending it without sparing expense or effort. The early Christians were great examples of this principle, evidenced in a description three hundred years later by an opponent named Lucian: "It is incredible to see the ardor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legisla-

tor has put into their heads that they are all brethren.” When Julian the Apostate was Roman emperor (A.D. 331-336), he tried to check Christianity’s influence and revive the Roman religions. To give his movement credibility, he imitated Christianity by initiating the first welfare system. It was a shame, he said, that the heathen should be left without support from their own while “among the Jews no beggar can be found, and the godless Galileans [i.e., the Christians] nourish not only their own, but even our own poor.” Thus, several centuries after Peter wrote this letter, the believers continued to follow his teaching.

### C. The Description of Love

First, then, love spares no expense or effort. Secondly, on the negative side,

...because love covers a multitude of sins.

Peter quotes Proverbs 10:12, “Hatred stirs up strife, but love draws a veil.” We must not drag the faults of others into the light, constantly confronting them with their weaknesses. Instead we must cover them up, seeing them as Christ sees them. This will build strong bonds of brotherhood in the body of Christ and further Christ’s atoning work. A smile of grace and thoughtful words will affirm the Lord’s love for people, encouraging them to live out the righteousness that is free in Christ.

A symbol of this priority is another gift I received in Romania. On my second trip, a family hosted me at great expense to themselves. Although they were being watched by the police, they said, “We want Brian in our home.” On the last day, the police came to get me, but I was not there. As we were being pursued by the secret police, instead of being concerned about himself, the only thing on my host’s mind was to give me a handmade bedspread from his wife. Although I had jeopardized his family, his main concern was giving me a gift. So to me this bedspread is a symbol of love not sparing effort or expense.

For those of you with children in school this is a very important principle. As parents, we are often so passionate about our children’s needs that we become advocates for them and neglect ministering to those in the school system. The principal in our elementary school, for example, is under great pressure from parents who lobby for their children’s interests. Every fall when he publishes the list of class assignments, unhappy parents beset his office, looking for him to fulfill their requests. I doubt if those people are concerned about the principal and his needs apart from how he affects their own interests.

Last week I was encouraged that one of our pastors who volunteers in the school system and has a good reputation for his work there received the Parent of the Year Award. When the principal introduced my friend at the ceremony, he broke down and wept. He said, “This is the man who brought the love of God into my life.” My friend took an interest in this man, apart from his children’s welfare, and it gave the principal the freedom to drop his role as administrator. He was released to pour out his heart about his divorce and problems in his new job, and ultimately my friend led him to Christ. Likewise, if we are to free people to live out the grace that Christ gives, we must look for opportunities to love those around us.

## III. Priority #3: The Pilgrim’s Home (4:9)

Having talked about clear minds for prayer and hearts filled with love, Peter now discusses the pilgrim’s home, saying,

Be hospitable to one another without complaint.

### A. The Need for Hospitality

The word “hospitality” does not refer to entertaining, an activity that is often motivated by the desire to impress important people.

Rather, hospitality means to love *strangers* by integrating them into the home as part of the family. In the first century, hospitality was an important ministry as there were few inns for lodging, and the ones that did exist had an unsavory reputation. Traveling teachers and evangelists required lodging from the body of Christ to do the work of the ministry. Thus hospitality was a major factor in spreading Christ’s kingdom, since missions would have been impossible without it.

A second motivation for hospitality was evangelism. By opening their home, the Christians’ lifestyle and character would be on display to the stranger. Many non-believers came to Christ through this witness. In our day, the church must recover this practice of hospitality so we might be instruments to reveal Jesus Christ to a watching world. Our future leaders will come from this generation, and their values are being formed right now. We have great opportunities for influence because our children go to school with these young people, and they enter our homes through those relationships. I pray that we can be a righteous contrast to the world’s values by showing God’s redemptive love in our homes.

I myself was a recipient of such hospitality, and came to know Christ as a result while in high school. I was a pagan, raised in a wealthy home, wanting for nothing materially, but hungry for love. I fled from my affluent home to poorer homes looking for love from those who would offer it. Finally, a Christian teacher opened her home to me, and allowed me to sit at her table as part of her family. What a blessing that was! I thrived on our conversations, and arranged it so I could be with her whenever possible. She is the example I followed that led me to Christ.

Opening up our homes in love does not require elegant place settings and exotic food. We simply need to set another place, and include someone in our lives. This is not a complicated procedure; it happens naturally in the family. To symbolize this principle I brought a plate that my youngest daughter made. It may seem crude when compared with expensive china, but it is a gift made by someone who loves me.

Frankly, friends, I am thankful we have a space problem at our church. I would rather have us spend money on hospitality than devoting it to a building project at this location. It is more valuable that we do Backyard Bible Clubs in individual homes than if we have a big program here. Our home fellowships are more important than having big group meetings in a fancy church building. One reason God may have constrained our building is to keep the ministry pure. Quiet homes opening up for evangelism will always be more effective than an organized program. It is tragic when ministry becomes committee meetings and bureaucracy, taking something simple and making it complicated. Moreover, hospitality will enrich our lives as well as those of the non-Christians to whom we minister. One very hospitable family in this church told me that their children got an invaluable education through the people who passed through their home. The evidence is in their children’s lives.

Since the time is short, we need to have our minds clear for prayer, our hearts full of love, and then we are to have homes filled with strangers, welcoming them as if they were Jesus Christ, giving them the best of what we have, especially our relationship with the Lord.

## IV. Priority #4: The Pilgrim’s Service (4:10-11)

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 [the oracles] 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.**

To those pilgrims who are fearful about the destruction of the earthly Jerusalem, Peter gives new hope. He tells them that God is building something wonderful, a heavenly city, and it will outlast history. The prophet Isaiah gives us a beautiful description of the restored city of Jerusalem. He says,

**“Behold I will set your stones in antimony,  
And your foundations I will lay in sapphires.  
Moreover, I will make your battlements of rubies,  
And your gates of crystal,  
And your entire wall of precious stones.” (Isa 54:11-12)**

This is a beautiful, radiant city that reflects the life of God. Peter says in chapter 2 that it is already under construction. Jesus is the cornerstone and we are the living stones of sapphires and rubies being built to God’s glory.

#### **A. Gifts Provide a Freedom to Focus**

Besides being the building materials, we have the privilege of doing the construction by taking a place on the city wall or in the temple. God has given each of us spiritual gifts to contribute to the building process. There is great freedom to focus because each of us has at least one gift to contribute in the area that we are gifted. As we all use our gifts in concert we will display the manifold beauty of God’s grace. Peter says that the end is near, and therefore we do not have to do everything. We must find our place in the wall, be a gem cutter with the materials God provides, and work where he places us, to his glory.

The symbol for this principle is my dulcimer. When we play in God’s symphony, we play only one instrument. We can focus on the best and neglect the good. Many of us do not realize that by doing too much we neglect the best. There is no shoddy workmanship allowed in this temple. We must focus on the best, and neglect what is secondary. That is a freedom that the spiritual gifts give.

#### **B. Gifts Lead to a Freedom of Simplicity**

Peter divides the gifts into two types, speaking gifts and serving gifts. Approximately eighteen out of twenty-one or so spiritual gifts are speaking gifts, and the rest are serving gifts. This may be an indication that the apostles did not expect the supernatural sign gifts of miracles and healings to be normative throughout the church age. They appear sporadically, but never to the extent as in the first century when they authenticated the apostolic ministry. We now have the written word of God to serve as the same testimony that these gifts displayed.

To discover our gifts, the process is quite simple: we must be available to show God’s glory by speaking or serving. To do this, we do not need organizational meetings, manuals, or seminars. We need to start by loving people and by using our particular gift. I am sure when some people go to choir for the first time, they do not know if they are an alto or a soprano, a tenor or a bass. If we are singing in a choir of believers who sing to God’s glory by our good works, we must start by singing. I guarantee that we will find our range quickly!

#### **C. True Freedom Comes Only to the Disciplined**

**Whoever speaks, let his speak, as it were, the utterances [oracles] of God.**

Just as it takes discipline to find freedom on an instrument, it takes discipline to use our gifts. Peter says, “If you have speaking gifts, you must speak the oracles of God.” Speaking gifts require Bible study and prayer to prepare our hearts. Peter raises Christians to the level of the Old Testament prophets who spoke the oracles of God. They did not have a choice about what they said. God spoke through the ear, illumined the image of God in the mind, changed their heart, and then set their tongues free to speak his words. Peter affirms that in some sense all Christians are prophets. When we speak, we must ask the Spirit to give us illumination so that our words may be few, but they will proclaim the word of God.

I take these words seriously when I prepare a series of messages. I work through the text a year ahead of time with a team made up of ten people, students and lay people, because I want to speak to you what the text says, not what I think it means. (I can’t tell you how rewarding it is to study with a group of people who are all learning together!) This group studies the passage for two weeks, and then we write it up. For three months I meditate on it, then I speak it. I am commanded by the Word to speak with accuracy, and it takes a team of people to help me towards that goal by correcting me and giving me balance. That is the seriousness with which we are to speak in life. Only the words of God can build this temple, not the opinions of men.

Peter then says,

**Whoever serves, let him serve, as by the strength which God supplies.**

Serving gifts must be done in dependence upon Christ, so that it is his life that gives aid, not our self-effort. Serving gifts cannot be done in the flesh any more than speaking gifts can. When we serve, it is the life of Christ in us that edifies, not our own strength. The first deacons chosen in the early church were to be men filled with the Spirit because waiting on tables was more than merely serving a meal; they were imparting the life of Christ. Therefore, they were to be filled with his strength and life (see Acts 6:3). That is what builds the temple into glory. As we depend on him to work through our speaking gifts or serving gifts, the whole city is built up for the glory of God in a symphony conducted by him.

This text speaks of a balanced life. Although the end is near, we do not have to be drunk with anxiety. Instead, we can have clear minds, loving hearts, open homes, and ministries that are focused. This will manifest the perfect harmony that God intends. Peter wrote to a generation under intense suffering, and indeed for them the end did come. Most of the apostles were martyred for their faith. Seven years after Peter wrote this letter, the Roman legions under Titus totally destroyed Jerusalem, just as Jesus had prophesied.

Peter’s words offer hope to a generation under pressure: We do not invest in an earthly Jerusalem. We are building the city whose foundation will endure forever and outlive history. It is a city that we build to God’s glory, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Although times are getting worse for us as well, I pray that we will respond to Peter’s words with a single eye and encouraged heart. Amen.

1. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner’s, 1910) 2:370-371.

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