

August 9, 2020

Freedom to Serve

Summary and Goal

Paul opened Galatians 5 by encouraging his readers to walk in the Spirit. Part of his direction was that the believers not walk in subjugation to the law, but the freedom of the Spirit. One aspect of Spirit-oriented living was the selfless service of one another. Peter also spoke of the importance of service to others being a hallmark of vibrant discipleship and a source of unity for the church.

Main Passages

1 Peter 4:7-11 (with Galatians 5:13-15 as background)

Session Outline

1. Keep Fervent in Love. (1 Peter 4:7-8)
2. Service is Stewardship. (1 Peter 4:9-10)
3. Service Glorifies God. (1 Peter 4:11)

Theological Theme

Service is an indispensable part of following the model of Christ.

Christ Connection

One of the major ways in which Christ identified Himself to His followers was that He was sent to serve, not be served.

Missional Application

Jesus' explanation of being a servant came on the heels of His teaching His disciples to reject the authority and power struggles so often found in the world. Rather, their pathway to true significance was to lovingly and sacrificially serve one another. Believers today have the same opportunity to preach the love of Christ through serving one another.

Introduction

As Paul continued to apply the freedom found in Christ to the believers in Galatia, who had been tempted to accept a gospel of works righteousness, he pointed out that the believer's freedom in Christ had implications on how the believer treated others. Paul's teaching echoed one of Jesus' well-known conversations with His disciples, which was recorded in Matthew 20:20-28. Immediately after explaining to the disciples that Jesus was heading to Jerusalem to be betrayed, tortured, and killed, two of the disciples (James and John) requested that they be permitted to sit on Jesus' right and left in His kingdom. Actually, they made their mom ask, which might be the only detail that could have made James and John look worse. After Jesus explained that they were asking something that was not His to grant, the rest of the disciples were indignant at James and John. They were not indignant because James and John asked, they were indignant because James and John asked first.

Seeing the teachable moment, Jesus clarified the nature of His kingdom. Jesus distinguished between the kingdom of the Gentiles, which referred to all the power structures of the world, and His own kingdom. The Gentiles (which can also be translated "nations") wielded power and lorded over their subjects to remind them who was in charge. Jesus' kingdom was completely different. Jesus told His disciples, "it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:26-28)

Surely these words must have rung in Peter's ears as he penned his first letter to a collection of persecuted believers who were struggling to withstand. In the midst of their hardship that threatened their unity, Peter directed them to remember Jesus and His promised second coming. More specifically, Peter told them to

exercise their freedom to serve one another with love and humility so that God received the glory. Peter's beautiful picture of what freedom in Christ means to the life of the believer is the focus of this week's lesson.

- What would you say is the world's attitude toward serving others? How do you see that as different from the church? How should it be different?
- What evidences do you see that the power structures in the world still reflect Jesus' description? What has your experience been in workplaces or organizations that share similar attitudes?
- What does freedom in Christ mean to you? How do we typically define freedom in our culture? How did Jesus exercise His own freedom during His earthly ministry?

Biblical Background

The apostle Peter's first letter in the New Testament was written in the early 60's, most likely during Peter's imprisonment in Rome. Peter referred to being in Babylon within the letter and, while there was a geographic location called Babylon in that day, the tyranny under Nero that formed the backdrop of the letter included the severe persecution that would lead Rome to be referred to symbolically as Babylon. One of the prevailing themes of Peter's first letter was standing firm in the face of such horrific persecution. Additionally, Peter was martyred during the reign of Nero, which ended in 67/68 AD. All of these clues made Rome the most likely place and circumstance of the letter's writing.

Peter's letter was a circular letter, which meant that it was intended to be passed from congregation to congregation throughout the region of Asia Minor. The order in which the locations appear in the greeting was likely indicative of the route the messenger, Silvanus, traveled. The encouragement in Peter's letter addressed suffering and persecution that was being experienced specifically because of the believer's professed faith in Christ. However, the persecution was not, as of yet, imperial policy. Instead, the persecution would have been sporadic in nature, initiated by the believers' fellow citizens in each of the named areas. While there was good news that faith in Christ was not illegal, per se, the unpredictability of unchecked persecution from others allowed fear and demoralization to spread rapidly throughout the congregations.

1. Keep Fervent in Love. (1 Peter 4:7-8)

Immediately prior to verse 7, Peter had written to the believers about living in accordance with the character of Christ in the midst of their persecution – even if that meant more persecution would come. In verses 5-6, Peter had referenced the final judgment as an assurance of God's justice toward those who persecuted the church. However, as Peter continued in his directions for the believers as to how they should live, he returned to the imminence of the “end of all things.” “The reason the end is near is that the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ have inaugurated the last days.” [Schreiner]

It would be appropriate here to make the important distinction between the imminence of the end of all things and the immediacy of the end of all things. Confusing these two concepts was a prompter of numerous false teachings in the first century, which was a trend that has yet to cease in the modern era. Imminence had to do with the fact that, through the person, work, and ministry of Jesus, all of the things that biblically and prophetically needed to happen in order for the end of human history to come about was accomplished. In other words, He could literally return at any moment. Immediacy, on the other hand, was tied to chronological time and believed that Jesus' return would occur within a particular calendar window. The Thessalonians, in particular, were beset by false teaching that espoused that, because so much time had passed and Jesus had not yet returned, that His second coming was not going to happen at all. However, Peter also addressed this matter in his letters (2 Peter 3:9), so validating the reality of Christ's return was a point of emphasis for the apostle.

As Peter shifted his focus from interacting with outsiders to how the believers should act toward one another, particularly in light of the imminence of Christ's return, he directed them to live soberly and with sound judgment. The two verbs were virtually synonymous and served to emphasize one another. Peter was directing the believers to not be alarmed, but to be clear-thinking and self-controlled. Scholar Thomas Schreiner

explained that, “The nearness of the end has led some believers to lose their heads and act irrationally. On the contrary, believers should think sensibly as they contemplate the brevity of life in this world. Those who know the contours of history are able to assess the significance of the present. Their sensible and alert thinking is to be used for prayer, for entreating God to act and move in the time that still remains.”

- How would you describe the biblically appropriate attitude for believers living in the world today? What particular characteristics and priorities in your life are evidence of your answer?
- Why do you think it is important to heed Peter in not being an alarmist as we read/watch the news? What does clear-minded prayer look like in your life?

Clear-minded thinking, as Peter would explain, had specific implications for the way that believers interacted with one another. The broad heading he used to qualify the applications of clear-minded thinking was being fervent in their love for one another. Love was so important that Peter wrote this verse with command force, in the original language. It was not, in any way, optional for believers to love one another because God is love. The writings of John and the teaching of Jesus continually communicated this. Peter went one step further grammatically in pointing out that such love between believers must be constant and unwavering (which is what the word for “fervent” literally meant.)

Verses 7-8, then, set the tone in this section of Peter’s letter by placing the force of how believers were to live in light of the imminence of Christ’s return squarely on their treatment of one another. This had two effects. First, the manner in which the believers demonstrated the love of Christ to one another, even in light of harrowing circumstances, was an evidence to outsiders of the reality and power of faith in Christ. Second, the constant love of Christ demonstrated to one another had the power of covering “a multitude of sins.” Certainly, this did not mean that loving another was a way of atonement for one’s sins – only Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection could accomplish that and had accomplished that with all finality. Rather, Peter understood the challenges of living in Christian community with other believers – especially in times that were as oppressive as the persecution Peter’s immediate readers were facing. In light of those challenges in living in community with one another, Peter pointed out that living with the love of Christ constantly demonstrated toward one another was able of diffusing and overlooking the inevitable friction of imperfect people living in harsh circumstances together.

2. Service is Stewardship. (1 Peter 4:9-10)

Verse 9 demonstrated the lengths to which constant love toward one another must go. When Peter referred to showing hospitality to others, he did so in such a way that placed the full demand of service at the forefront. First, being hospitable was one of the early identifiable marks of the Christian community. Paul wrote of it widely as it pertained to the manner in which he was treated by various congregations. John lauded its virtue and spoke of its necessity (3 John, especially) for the continued spread of the Gospel. Second, hospitality was critical to the mission of the church. Jesus sent His disciples out with the expectation that someone of peace, in whatever town or village they happened to come to, would open their homes to meet the disciples’ physical needs during their missionary endeavor (Matt. 10:11,40). Third, the scope of hospitality included meeting all of the needs of one’s guests. Frequently, considerable expense was involved in providing food and housing, especially if the stay one was requesting were to occur over a prolonged period of time.

Inasmuch as hospitality was an early identifier of the Christian community, the manner in which hospitality was extended was an identifier of those indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The joy and generosity of extending hospitality was vital in reflecting the love of Christ to others. To that end, Peter directed the believers to take on the inconvenience, expense, and adjustment of extending hospitality to others “without complaint.” The mental picture that accompanied the original language was “without grumbling.” Peter’s need to include “without grumbling” once again demonstrated Peter’s understanding that, over a period of time, such hospitable service could become tiresome and burdensome. How were believers to serve with such inexhaustible joy? By doing so in light of the imminence of Christ’s return. Service, then, was a stewardship of the manifold grace and mercy that had been extended to the believer through Christ’s own service.

- How open would you say you are to interruptions, disrupted schedules, and unplanned imposition from others? How easily do you adjust when you see needs that you could meet for others? How difficult is it for you to model Peter's instruction in verse 9?
- Describe a time when you chose to serve another person and, perhaps unexpectedly, sensed God's pleasure as you did so. How do you see that modeled in the earthly ministry of Jesus?

Peter tied the service of others to the reception of a "special gift" precisely for that purpose. Clearly, with the inclusion of the descriptor "special" to describe the gift, Peter was referring to the gifts imparted to believers by the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation. The word for gift (*charisma*) was frequently used in the New Testament to describe spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12).

Peter's instruction regarding the use of spiritual gifts was in keeping with the repeated instruction by the New Testament writers. The best-known case study was the situation Paul confronted in 1 Corinthians. The Corinthian believers had abused their spiritual gifts in the context of corporate worship to elevate themselves in the sight of their peers. Paul's instruction was congruent with Peter's in that he directed the Corinthian believers that their spiritual gifts were to be used in the worshipful service of others, not to glorify themselves. In the same vein, Peter directed the persecuted believers to demonstrate their consistent love for one another by selflessly and sacrificially serving one another. However, the believer's service was not to be some random occurrence, but one that aligned with the special gift with which the believer was endowed by the Holy Spirit.

The reason for the alignment with spiritual gifting was so that the believer was empowered to serve faithfully and fervently according to the work of the Holy Spirit in his or her own life. Again, everything Peter mentioned in this section of his letter was tied to living in light of the imminence of Christ's return. Serving one another as an expression of the fervent love for one another was made possible by the Holy Spirit's ministry to the believer while he or she served. Spiritual gifts fortified the believer during service in such a way that service is an act of life-giving worship. As a result, instead of becoming weary doing good, the believer is refreshed and invigorated by worshipful service.

3. Service Glorifies God. (1 Peter 4:11)

Peter continued by giving multiple examples of how spiritual gifts might be employed in the service of others. Clearly, with such an abbreviated list of the possible avenues of service, Peter's list was not meant to be an exhaustive index of the biblically acceptable spiritual gifts. Rather, Peter was dividing spiritual gifts into two broad categories of expression: speaking gifts and serving gifts. Were one to cross-reference Peter's categories with Paul's more detailed list, it would be evident how the Pauline list could easily be broken into Peter's two broader categories. However, it was not Peter's intention to focus on specific gifts, but their function. As Paul's corrective teaching to the Corinthians made clear, it was all too easy for believers to become isolated in focusing on their own spiritual giftedness to the exclusion of the significance of others' gifts. Peter avoided such a temptation by broadly referencing the gifts.

Peter's primary concern with spiritual gifts, since it was not identifying the specific gifts, was the ultimate end of the use of spiritual gifts. Specifically, the gifts were to be employed by the believers in the effort of fervently loving one another through service so that "in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ..." God's glory was the ultimate purpose for the use of the gifts. Peter qualified the use of both categories to ensure that God's glory was the result. Of the speaking gifts, Peter noted that they should be exercised as though "speaking the utterances of God." Of the serving gifts, they were to be employed by "serving by the strength which God supplies." Both the speaking "the utterances of God" and serving "by the strength God supplies" were impossible in the believer's strength alone, which was precisely Peter's intent. Even in the loving of one another with the love of Christ, the strength and character of God must be constantly applied in order for that love to be possible.

- What are some ways you enjoy serving others? For a believer, what might that indicate about the spiritual gifts that God has endowed that person with?
- How does it impact your view of serving to know that doing so in the way God desires requires God's empowering? Have you ever felt like an opportunity to serve required more than you were capable of? What other biblical figures do you know that were given opportunities to serve God in roles that were beyond their power alone?

Peter explained that God receives glory through Jesus Christ. The doxology with which Peter closed this section extolled the eternal role of Christ as the possessor of dominion and glory forever. Petrine theology traced the glory of God through His work of reconciliation through Jesus. As it pertained specifically to the freedom of believers to serve one another, the manner of service was patterned after the demonstrated, obedient, loving service of Jesus on the cross. The community that was directed to serve one another was made one body, the Church, with Christ as its head. Serving one another with the love of Christ in sight of the world that desperately needs Christ, unified the body of Christ to be able to faithfully withstand the persecution of the present world in light of the coming glory of the eternal new heaven and new earth.

Conclusion

Paul warned the Galatian believers to not allow their freedom to be distorted into a mirage of freedom by pursuing licentiousness and fleshly desire. Such pursuits, though they might feel free in the moment of casting off restraint and discipline, actually wound up enslaving the believer to the desires of the flesh and damaging the witness of the collective body of Christ. The alternative was infinitely more glorious! Believers were freed from such shackles so that they might demonstrate the love of Christ to one another and, in so doing, show forth the beauty of the love of Christ. Peter spoke of doing so in light of the imminence of Christ's return, understanding that the believer's time of exile on earth is short. In light of Peter's teaching, here are some important points of consideration.

First, believers must discipline themselves to view the world in which we live with clear-headed judgment. Doing so demands the elimination of two unhealthy extremes. The first extreme is the alarmist mindset that leads to anxiety, worry, and fear. The conditions that Peter was addressing in his letter included severe persecution of the believers, ostracism from all commercial endeavors, exclusion from families and social connection, and so on. For Peter to respond to such circumstances with a warning to be sober-minded and clear-thinking is helpful for believers today who deal with copious sources of anxiety at local, state, national, and global levels. God is no less sovereign than He was during the persecution under Nero. The alarmist mindset is based on a temptation to forget His sovereignty and must be avoided. The second extreme, however, is an apathetic mindset that leads to hopelessness, lethargy, and missional drift. Peter directed the believers to, in effect, continue to be useful for the cause of Christ in their world, no matter what the circumstance may be. That is a good word for every believer at any point in human history.

Second, remaining fervent in love with one another in the body of Christ is difficult – and Peter would not let that be an excuse. The refreshing thing about the manner in which Peter addressed believers loving one another is that he acknowledged the difficulty of doing so for a prolonged period of time. Believers are saved, but they are not perfect! Serving one another, then, means that frustration and fatigue will set in at some point. While he acknowledged the likelihood of growing weary serving one another, Peter repeatedly pointed the believers back to the power of Christ in them to fortify and refresh them in serving one another. Additionally, lovingly serving one another actually has the power to bring about reconciliation in relationships because the love of Christ becomes the defining characteristic of the fellowship of the church.

Third, God created His people to serve, but empowers them so that it becomes an act of worship. Notice what Peter indicated as the end result of service – “God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.” Peter did not say that the goal of service was everyone being busy or all the boxes being checked. Such a view of Christian service is impoverished and without life. Peter directed the believers to serve according to how God had uniquely gifted each of them at the point of salvation to reflect the character of Christ through service. One of the benefits of

serving in such a way was the resilience in service that came as a result of serving as an act of worship. Peter also made clear that service, much like loving one another, was not an optional element of the Christian life. Rather, it was a critical way of following in Christ's footsteps according to His character. For that reason, the disciple must pursue opportunities to serve the body of Christ according to his or her own spiritual gifting, whether those gifts fall in the area of speaking or serving. As a result, God will be glorified.

- Would you say that you tend toward the “alarmist” or “apathetic” end of the spectrum? What are some ways that you have found to remain clear-minded and exercising sound judgment? Who prayerfully participates with you in that effort?
- Describe the first time that you felt like you were serving according to your spiritual giftedness. How was it noticeably different from other times when you had served? How did that opportunity help you discern future opportunities to serve in similar ways?
- Who, in your own experience, would you say has demonstrated a lifestyle that most consistently served others out of love? How did you notice that impacting their willingness to live in harmony with others? How would you describe their disposition? What about their life would you most like to replicate?

** Notes referenced were taken from, *Schreiner, Thomas R. 1, 2 Peter, Jude. NAC. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003.*