

Live as if Tomorrow Is Your Last Day • 1 Peter 4:7-11

When I was growing up my family took an annual Florida vacation during my school's winter break, usually in February. The school vacation was a week but my parents would take me out of class for an extra week. The teachers gave a long list of assignments to be done while we were gone. My parents challenged me to do the homework while we drove so I could enjoy the days on the beaches of Fort Lauderdale.

It took three full days of driving. For an eight or ten year old boy that was a major percentage of my life to-date. After a few hours on the road I started asking if we were almost there. My parents would say, "We're almost there. Florida is near." That could be understood as a parental lie or an accommodation of adult perspective to childhood thinking. Every mile was nearer. From the long-term perspective of a lifetime, three days isn't very long, so it was truly "near". My parents could have explained exactly when we would get there and how many miles were left but I probably would not have understood. After all, I was not old enough to drive and did not fully understand such things. By the second day of driving it seemed to me that life was an ordeal I had to suffer. I kept asking and they kept saying, "We are almost there. Florida is near."

First century Christians became weary in suffering. Life was difficult. They wondered how much longer life would last. They asked when God would bring history to a close. The answer came from Peter who said, "*The end of all things is near.*"

His words could be understood in different ways. For some, the end was near because they soon would die. For God, it meant that the end of a chapter of history was close—at least in terms of the whole length of human history.

In this context Peter had a principle for how to live the rest of life's journey. Although the travel

may seem long and difficult, live as if tomorrow were your last day. As you travel, get your homework done. In other words, use the time well. Live, think and work as if tomorrow is the day you will arrive in heaven. Live the journey in expectation of the destination. This will improve the trip and prepare you well for when you arrive. Peter explains his 14th principle in I Peter 4:7-11 like this:

The end of all things is near. Therefore, be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

If we knew that tomorrow would be the last day of our lives, here is how to live. First, start out with a clear mind. Peter said in 4:7, "*The end of all things is near. Therefore, be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.*" One translation of the Greek word used here is "*preserve your sanity.*" So, don't let your thinking get out of balance or become strange.

It is amazing the truly strange ideas people can come up with. Over the years I have been given so many books, articles and tapes on such broad topics that now I don't promise to read anything others give me. And if it is anonymous, I throw it away and never look at

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it. There just is not enough time in life for all the divergent ideas and notions people have.

I have also discovered that some people move from one unusual idea to another. It is not so much about the current topic as it is that they are not clear thinkers. They get easily caught up in a current fad or theory. They are not balanced. They do not connect biblical teaching and other's views with their ideas.

When you find yourself going off into theories that are different from godly people, when you think you have a message from God that no one else has, when you become obsessed with one issue to the exclusion of all others, when your head spins with unusual ideas—Stop! Talk to wise, godly, balanced Christians; read the Bible; take a deep breath; clear your head. If you are living like tomorrow is your last day, do it with a clear mind.

And do it with self-control. Peter writes in I Peter 4:7, *“The end of all things is near. Therefore, be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.”* In the Greek language the word Peter used for self-controlled refers to being sober. It is actually the opposite of being drunk. It came to mean self-responsible. It is telling us to be realistic in our thinking and behave in a responsible manner.

When asked what they would do if they found out they would die tomorrow, some people answer, “I’d go out and get so drunk I wouldn’t know whether I was alive or dead.” That is the exact opposite of a Christian’s approach. The Christian acknowledges that death will come tomorrow and then behaves in a positive, righteous and sober way for the rest of today and the beginning of tomorrow.

In other words, behave responsibly. Don’t say and do things that may mislead or hurt others. Even if you have strange ideas, don’t act on them. Be responsible in your behavior.

There is a risk to this biblical advice. Most people with strange ideas and out-of-control behavior don’t think their ideas are strange or that their behavior is out of control. That is why we need the Bible and other Christians to keep us in balance. Keep in mind Peter is suggesting this is the way we are to live every day—if it is the last

day of life or there are years more ahead.

A clear mind and self-control leads to proper personal prayer according to I Peter 4:7. *“The end of all things is near. Therefore, be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.”* A fascinating concept is being taught here. It is that we are capable of praying really bad prayers. If we have foggy minds and uncontrolled behavior, our prayers are probably defective.

Occasionally someone may tell us they have decided to do something that is obviously unwise. We tell them to reconsider their behavior but they reply, “I have prayed about this.” As if that ratifies a bad decision! Part of me wants to say, “So what?” Just because you have prayed about robbing a bank, having an affair or writing a book does not make it the right thing to do. Check out your thinking, behave responsibly and pray personally to develop a balanced approach to every day of life—whether it is the last day or the first of thousands to come.

Personal prayer should be the habit of every Christian. But personal prayer should not be asking God to do what we want; it should be asking what God wants us to do. Pray every day as if it were your last day. Then on your last day, pray as you have prayed every other day.

Peter’s fourth counsel is really interesting and important. He calls every Christian to deep love: *“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”*

The words “above all” refer back to being clear minded, self-controlled and praying. Even more than those things, love others. In other words, if you have a choice between prayer and love, pick love. If you have a choice between love and self-control, pick love. If you have a choice between deep love and a clear mind, pick deep love. If you have to choose between personal prayer and deep love make sure that deep love comes first. It is not suggesting that we neglect the others but it is saying that at the top of the list, above all, is deep love.

Love is doing what is best for other people. It is other-centered rather than self-centered. This actually helps us clear our heads, control our behavior and pray our prayers. We are acting for

the good of others.

What Peter wrote next has become one of the most familiar and quoted lines of the Bible. It is a wonderful truth that “*love covers over a multitude of sins.*” When it refers to Jesus and his death on the cross it means that his love atones for our sins. For us, it means that we do our best to de-emphasize the sins of others rather than over-emphasize the sins of others.

Think of the ways mothers cover their children’s sins. She says her son works for the federal government (he’s an inmate at Leavenworth). She says her children call her on the phone (actually, it’s once a year on Mother’s Day). She says her daughter is entrepreneurial (she ran away from home at 16). Mothers love their children and try to cover up their children’s sins with the best possible spin they can give.

To be sure, this is not suggesting that Christians should lie to make each other look good. But it is saying that we ought to have that kind of mother’s love toward other people, making them look as good as we possibly can.

One of the ways we can express love for others is with happy hospitality, or, as Peter puts it in verse 9, “*Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.*”

Hospitality was very important in the first century. Hotels as we know them today did not exist. Public inns were expensive, filthy, dangerous and immoral. So, Christians began to offer their homes as places of hospitality for other Christians as well as for non-Christians.

The Greek word for hospitality joins two words meaning “love of strangers.” Christian hospitality in its root meaning is not so much inviting relatives or “old” friends over for dinner. It is being hospitable or loving toward those who are strangers. And doing it with delight. No grumbling. We say hello to strangers. We are nice to people. We warmly welcome newcomers into our neighborhood, at work, at school and in church. Smile and say hello to someone

you have never met before.

Put this in the perspective of today being the last day of your life. Do you really want to spend the last day of your life inviting a total stranger out for lunch or into your home? Consider Mother Teresa. She took the dying from the streets of Calcutta and brought them in for the final hours of their lives. She washed them and put them in a bed with clean sheets. She fed them if they could eat. She talked to them and held their hands until they died. She loved them so they would not have to die alone. Hospitality is doing this as a way of life for the rest of our lives.

Maybe we don’t like strangers. We don’t like to talk to people. We don’t like to smile. We would rather not meet our neighbors. We get uncomfortable around street people and the homeless. We wish there were no new employees at work and we avoid eye contact at church. The Bible says do it anyway and be happy about it! Happiness, in this case, is a choice.

One cold spring day Charleen and I were driving through north Minneapolis. There was a lonely-looking man on a street corner with a sign asking for money. Other cars just drove past. We stopped. I reached out and gave him a ten-dollar bill. He said, “God bless you!” and Charleen immediately responded, “He already has.”

Because God has blessed us we live this way as Christians up until the last day of our lives. God has shown love to us, even when we were strangers to him, so we do for others as God has done for us.

All these last-day-of-your-life actions are tied together in the sixth concept on Peter’s list: Be a blessing to other people. We read about it in I Peter 4:10-11:

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it

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with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

The Bible teaches that God gives gifts to every Christian. Gifts are different abilities to serve others. If you are a Christian God has already given you a gift with which you can benefit and bless others. Those gifts fit into two big categories: speaking and serving. Some people have both kinds of gifts. Some have only one kind of gift. But, we all are gifted!

So what is your gift? What are you really good at? Teaching? Helping? Giving? Leading? Whatever God has made you good at is what you should do in church and in the community to bless others in the name of Jesus. Maybe your gift is best used teaching Sunday School or tutoring children who struggle in school. Maybe your gift is best utilized advocating for the poor or working in the church nursery. Maybe you are most gifted at running a corporation as a Christian or ushering in a church service.

Whatever you are good at, whatever God has gifted you to do—serve others with your gifts right up to the last day of your life. The whole Christian idea is to fulfill the purpose of our lives by doing what God has gifted us to do in serving others right up to the end. We should live to bless others every chance we get. Suppose you are really good at helping the unemployed find a job. Wouldn't it be great to spend the last day of your life helping someone find employment rather than watching the clock tick out your last hours? That is what Jesus did. He blessed and helped the thief on the cross next to him up until Jesus took his last breath.

A totally Christian way of thinking and living is that God has blessed us and we want to bless others—with our words, our money, our actions, our lives, our all.

This last-minute living is summed up by Peter at the end of I Peter 4:11 where he says, *“To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.”* This is a benediction. That word comes from two Latin words: *bene* means good; *diction* means saying. It is a good saying. The total sum of a Christian's life is to make God look good, to

show off the greatness and power of God through our lives, to point to the magnificence of God that has been forever and will last forever and ever.

A few years back there was a fictional movie about a president of the United States who became disabled and died. The White House staff substituted a look-alike who passed for the president. A Secret Service agent who was the president's bodyguard knew he was a fake and had a disdain for the substitute. As the story progressed, the stand-in showed presence, skill and leadership. Near the end of the film the Secret Service agent offered the ultimate compliment when he said he would be willing to take a bullet for the look-alike.

Imagine having such respect for someone that you would be willing to be shot and die to protect the other person's life and reputation. That is how it is for Christians when it comes to Jesus Christ. We know he already died and gave his life for us. Now we are willing to live or die for him. Whether the last day of our lives or any day of our lives, let us live exactly the same way. May we live praising God, making him look good, willing to do whatever he asks.

We are Christians. We live *“so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.”*

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