

Scripture Reading: 1st Peter 4:1-8 (NASB - New American Standard Bible)

¹Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ²so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. ³For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. ⁴In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you; ⁵but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.

⁷The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. ⁸Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. Today we return to our study in the First Epistle of Peter. We will cover the first half of chapter 4 today and the latter half of the chapter next week.

I noticed, while I was preparing today's message, that chapter 4 returns to some of the themes we saw in previous parts of this epistle. For example, Peter begins this chapter with comments on Christ's suffering and how we should follow Christ's example and suffer for doing what is right and necessary, which we are doing for the benefit of others. In verses 2 to 4, Peter goes on to highlight how Christians are supposed to live upright lives, forsaking our previous lifestyles of sinful practices. And he said that unbelievers will often ridicule us for our upright lives. If we suffer ridicule or accusation, let it be for the sake of our Christian lifestyle and not because of some crime or annoyance that we cause to happen. And Peter closes this chapter in verse 19 with an exhortation to faithfulness. All these themes are covered in chapter 4 and they echo themes that we have seen in previous chapters of this book.

Let's take a look at chapter 4, verse 1: "Therefore..." In most English translations of the Bible, this chapter begins with the word "Therefore." In some of my previous sermons, I have given you a funny little principle of Bible study: "When you see the word "Therefore," try to figure out what the word is there for." For what purpose does the word "Therefore" appear there in that sentence? This is an invitation to take a look at the previous passage and find out what the author said previously, because he is continuing a thought that he mentioned in the verses that come before this one.

Before we do that, let's read chapter 4, verses 1-2 – "Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ²so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God."

Let's look at some of the previous verses for Peter's earlier statements. In chapter 3, verse 18, Peter says that "Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous One for us unrighteous people, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit." The purpose for which Christ came to earth was to be a sacrifice for our sins so that our relationship with God might be restored, to pay the penalty for our sins by His death, in the flesh, on the cross.

Let's look at chapter 2, verses 21-24 – "²¹For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, ²²WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH [Isaiah 53:9]; ²³and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; ²⁴and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to

sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.” Verse 21 says Christ left us an example, and in verse 23 it says Christ suffered criticism, but without retaliating against the people who were reviling Him (criticizing Him). We follow His example when we suffer for doing the right thing despite criticism. But there is something else we must do: verse 24 says we must die to sin, we must not live lives that are marked by our previous lifestyles of sinfulness but instead we must “live to righteousness,” we must live God-honoring lives. That takes discipline and it means saying No to sinful pleasures ... *saying No continuously* to those temptations.

Let’s return to 1 Peter 4:1 – “Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.” Christ suffered injustice and death. We Christians sometimes suffer injustice. And we are to make the sometimes painful effort to get rid of sin in our lives. We won’t do that perfectly, but for each of us, our life is to be marked as being a Christ-follower who seeks to live honorably and put away sinful practices. Bible commentators say that this is what it means when verse 1 says we “cease from sin.” This is not a perfect, 100% ceasing from all sin, but we are to have a lifestyle that is marked by refusing to engage in sinful pleasures.

The study notes in the *ESV Study Bible* give three possible interpretations of that phrase “cease from sin” The authors of the study notes say that the first interpretation that they describe is unlikely to be what Peter is referring to. The second and third interpretations are both favorable to my way of thinking about that phrase. Here is what the *ESV Study Bible* says of the second and third interpretations of the phrase “he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin”:

(2) Others [commentators] have suggested that this is a reference to the believer being dead to the power of sin, as a result of having died with Christ (similar to Paul’s concept in Rom. 6:1–11).

(3) More likely, Peter’s point is that when believers are willing to suffer, the nerve center of sin is severed in their lives. Although believers will never be totally free from sin in this life (cf. James 3:2; 1 John 1:8), when believers endure suffering for the sake of Christ they show that their purpose in life is not to live for their own pleasures but according to the will of God and for his glory.¹

And my favorite commentary on 1st Peter has this to say:

Just as Christ suffered in the flesh (by dying, as 3:18 indicates), so too believers should resolve to suffer – for the decision to suffer indicates that they have ceased to let sin have dominion over them. Verse 2 [of chapter 4] supplies the purpose for the exhortation given in v. 1. Believers should resolve to suffer in order to live for the will of God during the rest of their lives.²

Let me read 1 Peter 4:1-2 again – “Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,² so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.” This is what our lifestyle should be: Do not live for sinful lusts but live lives that honor God and that build up His kingdom.

Let me read two important verses from chapter 2 ... verses 11-12 – “¹¹Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. ¹²Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.” We Christians are aliens in this sinful corrupt world, because we are citizens of the Kingdom of God, so we must not participate in the fleshly lusts that the pagan Gentiles engage in. Keep your behavior excellent. If you are going to get criticized for something, let it be for doing good rather than for doing wrong.

¹ *ESV® Study Bible*. Crossway. Study note on 1 Peter 4:1.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), p. 198.

Let's return to chapter 4 and continue with verses 3-4 – “³For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. ⁴In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you.”

Peter was writing to his fellow Christians living in a society where it was common to engage in all kinds of sinful behavior, including idolatry and the worship of the Roman emperor. It was considered normal behavior to act in such ways, and Christians were seen to be living contrary to accepted norms, and even being unpatriotic in refusing to worship the emperor. Mostly, the people in that society loved indulging in all kinds of fleshly lusts. Many of the Christians had been converts from among the Gentiles, but now they have repented of their former sins and they seek to live God-honoring lives. It is not easy to keep living a disciplined life and some Christians fall back into sinful ways and some Christians can't endure the criticism they receive from the pagan Gentiles around them. Peter is exhorting his fellow Christians to endure the criticism and remain faithful and not participate in the old lusts they used to engage in. In verse 3, Peter says: You have already spent enough time pursuing the lustful pleasures of the Gentile society in your lifestyle before you were converted to Christ, so now you ought not fall back into such sinful practices. The Gentiles now ridicule the followers of Christ for living clean, disciplined lives. They cannot understand the self-discipline of the Christians and they think the Christians are foolish for not pursuing lustful pleasures.

Let's read verses 4 and 5 – “⁴In all this, they [the Gentiles] are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you; ⁵but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.”

Peter exhorts and also encourages his fellow Christians. Not only does he want Christ followers to remain faithful in the midst of criticism and temptations, but he reminds his readers that at the end of time, those sinful Gentiles will have to give an account of their lives to the One who has the power and authority to judge both living persons and those who have died. We will all die one day and face judgment. The language Peter uses here is courtroom language. Everyone will face the Judge after they die and will have to give an account of how they lived their lives on earth. The Judge might be God the Father or it might be Jesus Christ – various verses in various places in the New Testament indicate one or the other as the One who will judge us for what we have done with our lives when we lived on earth. Peter is telling his audience that the Gentiles are criticizing you now, but in the end, all of us die and all of us will face judgment for how we lived our lives.

Let's read one of the passages that describes the final judgment. Revelation 20:11-15 – “¹¹Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. ¹³And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. ¹⁴Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

The book of life is the book that contains the names of those persons who trusted Christ as their Savior during their life on earth. Christ died for their sins when He was crucified on the cross and paid the penalty for their sins – these people will not be judged for their sins because their sins were already judged on the cross. Their names are listed in the book of life. The other books mentioned in this passage are books that contain a listing of the deeds of all persons. Anybody whose name is not written in the book of life is judged for their deeds and then they are punished with what is

called the second death: being thrown into the lake of fire. That is the fate of those Gentiles that Peter is discussing in chapter 4 of his epistle.

Let's read 1 Peter 4:5-6 – “⁵But they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.”

Verse 6 has puzzled many people over the years. What exactly does it mean for the gospel to be preached to those who are dead? What does it mean for those people to be judged in the flesh and later live in the spirit in accordance with God's plan? Is that judgment different or the same as the judgment in verse 5 of the living and the dead?

Some people imagine that verse 6 might be saying that the gospel is preached to the spirits of deceased persons who are in the underworld in order to give them a second chance for salvation after they die. People who promote this notion connect this verse to the verse in chapter 3 which I told you in my previous sermon was also a rather puzzling verse: 1 Peter 3:19 – “... ¹⁹in which also He [Christ] went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison.” Was Christ preaching the gospel to deceased sinners in the underworld to give them a second chance after death? No, He was not – that is the conclusion of the best Bible commentators. In 1 Peter 3:19, Christ is most likely proclaiming His victory over sin and death, not preaching the gospel. The notion of a second chance at salvation after death is contrary to the teachings in other parts of the New Testament, where it is clear that we are judged for what we have done while living on this earth – for example, the passage in Revelation that I read a moment ago. Also, the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 indicates that your only chance for salvation is while you are living on earth, before you die, not afterwards.

A careful analysis of the Greek words and grammar in 1 Peter chapter 4 brings many Bible scholars to the following conclusions. In verse 5, unbelievers will not escape judgment since they will all be held accountable for how they have lived their lives here on earth – even after death they will still face judgment. Unbelievers had ridiculed believers for living clean lives and not indulging in fleshly pleasures and these unbelievers pointed out that everyone ends up dying in the end, so it seems pointless to the unbeliever to live a disciplined life. What verse 6 is teaching is that those persons who responded to the preaching of the gospel do die a physical death, because back in the Garden of Eden, Adam sinned against God and brought the curse of death to mankind – to every human being who has ever lived – as we read about in Genesis 3 and Romans 5. That's what is meant by the phrase “judged in the flesh as men.” The judging of verse 5 is different than the judging of verse 6. Verse 5 warns non-Christians that they will all face the judgment of God in the end, even if they have died. Verse 6 encourages Christians in that, while they suffer the judgment of physical death, God promises that they will be made alive by the Spirit and be resurrected to eternal life at the end of time. That is God's plan, says 1 Peter 4:6 – “⁶For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those [faithful Christians] who are [now physically] dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men [and suffered the curse brought to all mankind due to Adam's disobedience], they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.”

Let's read what commentator Thomas Schreiner says:

Peter considered the case of believers who had died physically. These people heard and believed the gospel when they were alive but had subsequently died. Unbelievers viewed the death of believers as proof that there is no advantage in becoming a believer, for all [persons] without exception die. Peter indicated, however, that unbelievers do not understand the whole picture. Even though from a human perspective believers seem to gain no benefits from their faith since they die, from God's perspective (which is normative), they live according to the Spirit. ... Death is not the last word for believers. They will be raised from the dead. The contrast between the “flesh” and “spirit” here is parallel to 1 Pet 3:18, for Christ also died in terms of his flesh, but he was raised to life by the Holy Spirit. A similar destiny awaits believers [people who trusted in Christ before their death]. They die

physically but will be raised to life by the Holy Spirit. ... This interpretation makes the best sense contextually, for it gives the readers encouragement to continue to endure the social ostracism they are facing from their contemporaries. Peter reminded his readers that even if they die physically, death is not the last word. The resurrection awaits them.³

That is the purpose of these verses: to give hope to believers in the midst of the criticisms they face from unbelievers. That is a theme we have seen in previous parts of Peter's epistle.

Let me move on to the next section of today's passage. This is the last section that we will study today.

1 Peter 4:7-8 – ⁷"The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. ⁸Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins."

In several places in the New Testament, we read this phrase that "the end of all things is near." This is not to say that the end of this current age is now ending and Christ is about to return. What this means is that God has now inaugurated the current church age and that the end of this age may happen at any time with the return of Christ. We don't know when that will be exactly, but we must always be ready for it to happen. That is the purpose of future prophesy: to call us to live faithfully at the current time. Because the end of all things may happen at any time, Peter tells us that we must live according to the principles outlined in the verses we have read earlier today in chapter 4: turn away from sin, live as faithful Christians, be willing to suffer as Christ suffered, endure the criticisms of unbelievers, understand that judgment will come someday to those unbelievers, and know that even though believers suffer physical death, they will be raised to new life by the Spirit and enjoy eternal life with the Lord Jesus. This is all according to God's plan.

From verse 7 onwards, Peter exhorts us to live by some additional Christian virtues. Let me read verses 7 and 8 again, but this time in the New International Version (1984) – ⁷"The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. ⁸Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." Peter exhorts us to be clear minded and to be sober and self-controlled *so that we can pray ... or: for the sake of your prayers* (this word "prayers" is plural in the Greek).

Let me quote from the commentary by Wayne Grudem:

The reason given for being sane and sober is for your prayers; the plural suggests specific, individual prayers throughout each day. The idea is not simply 'so that you can pray' (NIV), but 'in order to pray more effectively, more appropriately', Christians should be alert to events and evaluate them correctly in order to be able to pray more intelligently. Peter's words also imply that prayer based on knowledge and mature evaluation of a situation is more effective prayer.⁴

"...Be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray."

And then in verse 8, Peter returns to a theme found frequently throughout Christian teaching – he says, ⁸"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." This echoes 1 Peter 1:22 – "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart." The most important thing we are to do is to love one another deeply, to love your brothers and sisters here in church. This is what Christ said in John 13:34-35 is the activity that marks us out as Christian disciples – I have quoted that verse for you numerous times in previous sermons because it is so important. Jesus said, ³⁴"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love

³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), pp. 208–209.

⁴ Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 17, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 181.

one another. ³⁵By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Let's return to 1st Peter and see what Peter says in the latter part of verse 8 – “... because love covers over a multitude of sins.” This means that when we lavish love on other people, oftentimes the sins and offenses and mistakes of other people are overlooked – they fade away in significance.

Matthew 18:21-22 – “²¹Then Peter came and said to Him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ ²²Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’” This means that we forgive our brother an endless number of times.

Proverbs 10:12 – “Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all transgressions.” If you keep hatred brewing by remembering sins, you keep on damaging relationships and damaging yourself as well. “But love covers all transgressions.”

This reminds me of a story I heard from my biology teacher when I was in high school. He was a Christian man who often told us stories that paralleled biblical teaching. He told us the story of a certain lady who had been very much hurt by her husband in many ways. She wanted to take some sort of revenge against him and she sought some advice from her doctor. She wanted to hurt her husband in the most devastating way that she could, so her doctor gave her the following plan. She should do a lot of really nice things to him for a period of two weeks, such as cooking his favorite foods. And then – at the end of the two-week period – she would devastate her husband with the news that she plans to divorce him. The lady thanked her doctor and proceeded to follow through with that plan.

A few months later, the lady visited her doctor and he asked her if the plan had worked. Oh ... she replied that when she had put the first part of the plan into action and began doing all kinds of nice things to her husband, he suddenly began doing all kinds of nice things back to her. She said to her doctor: “We fell in love together all over again!” The marriage was saved and they stayed together. (It is possible that this was the intended outcome that the doctor had in mind when he gave her the action plan).

What this story illustrates is that when you lavish love on someone, very often you get a positive response in return, and then the relationship gets back on track with positive actions toward each other despite the hurts of the past. I think this is a nice illustration of the principle that we love one another fervently and thus a multitude of sins just fade away in significance.

I have come to the end of my message today. Let me sum up with the main lessons of today's passage of Scripture:

- Christ gave us an example to follow: He suffered criticism for doing the right thing, and we Christians likewise should endure criticism from non-believers.
- Christ died for our sins, so we should not let sin have any kind of rule over us – that's what verse 1 means when it says that we “have ceased from sin” ... we have ceased to live lives marked by sin.
- Followers of Christ do not live for sin anymore but rather, from now on, we live for the will of God.
- Non-believers criticize us for our clean lives, but in the end they will all face the judgment of God.
- Though Christians do suffer from the curse of Adam and we die physically, since we have embraced the gospel message, we will live for eternity with Jesus.
- Be clear-minded and sober for the purpose of effective prayer.
- “Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.”