

The Practice of Community Part I

a sermon in the series

A Gospel-Oriented, Mission Driven, and Community-Centered Church

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I Peter 4:7-10

But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. 8 And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins." 9 Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. 10 As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

In our last message from this series we discussed a community of pastors and that the church is truly to be a community of pastors. God has designed and structured His church so pastoring can happen at different levels. Husbands and fathers are to disciple their wives and children, older men and women are to pastor younger men and women, and all of us are to pastor one another by encouragement, exhortation, and correction. And finally, of course, God has called men to shepherd or pastor the flock of God; we call these men pastors or elders.

This is why God created the church to be a community, so that every one is being shepherded and is shepherding. Once again we define community *as a group of believers whose lives depend upon each other and interact with each other through food, relationship, and sharing of life for the advancement of the kingdom of God.* That's what a community of believers—the church—is. It's a group of people who have covenanted and committed themselves to depend upon one other, to interact with one another in the various ways of life.

That means, therefore, the Lord hates the idea of a personal Christianity that individualizes faith, isolates persons from the church, and makes church an event or place to attend a religious event. He hates that attitude within us that tends to separate us from one another and stand on our own in the practice of our faith. You will not spiritually prosper by yourself. You were not designed to live without air and you were not designed to relate to Christ without community. That is so contrary to our twenty first century thinking of Christianity. We have so personalized it that it's "just Jesus and me." Thank God there is you and Jesus, but there's room for a whole lot more

than you and Jesus in this thing called Christianity. He intended you to be one part of a body of believers, a community of faith.

We're looking forward to spring. Spring is a time when we can fire up the grills in the backyard and have some good grilled food. If you remove a hot and flaming coal from the other burning charcoal briquettes that one briquette will eventually cool off and die. When you place that coal back on the pile of briquettes it will again get hot and burn. Isn't the object lesson obvious? Alone you cannot sustain fervor for the Lord; you will cool off. But living in community with other believers you will burn fervently and you will help others around you to burn in their love for Christ.

That's God's plan. Don't mess with it. You can't perfect it. We need this.

As we deal with this concept of being a community we have to ask some obvious questions: what does that look like? How do we do that? So I want to talk about functioning as a community and this text establishes several things for us. We're not going to be able to cover all of them today, but first of all I want to direct your attention to the fact that Peter says a community loves one another.

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

And above all things have fervent love for one another, for “love will cover a multitude of sins.”
(1 Peter 4:8)

Peter is establishing a foundational principle in the kingdom of God. He says to have fervent love one for another, but he prefaces it by saying, “above all things, have fervent love.” In other words, the most important thing the church does is not evangelism; it's loving one another. Look at verse seven. He compares and establishes a list of priorities with prayer and love.

I. Prayer and Love

But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. (1 Peter 4:7)

He commands us to pray, to be serious, to be watchful in prayer. No one needs to explain this morning that prayer is important to the Christian life. As you cannot survive without the Word

of God and grow spiritually, you cannot grow without prayer. Prayer is as natural to the new Christian as breathing. It's one of the first things we do. There's just something automatic and innate within the new heart that cries out to God, "Abba Father." The Spirit of God is in the new heart and He breathes prayer.

Prayer is one of the ways you practice relationship with God. It's not just praise asking for things but prayer is literally fellowship with God. It is an established fact that a Christian cannot be devoted without it. It's essential. Yet Peter says even above prayer love one another. Above all these things, including your prayer life, love one another.

Is Peter saying that loving one another is more important than prayer? No. That's nonsense. He's saying you cannot pray without love and be sincere. Peter may rank love above prayer but he does it in order to say love is foundational to everything we do in the Christian life. Remember I Corinthians 13, the love chapter. It says you can do a whole host of religious things, even be a martyr and give everything you have, but if you do not have love as the foundational motive it's nothing, it's in vain, it doesn't profit, it's of no value. Peter is saying the same thing the Apostle Paul is saying in I Corinthians 13: love is the cornerstone, the foundational motive of everything we do including prayer.

I can choose not to pray or love you or I can pray for you but not love you, but I cannot love you and not pray for you.

I can pray for you and not have love for you. How often we pray for things and our heart is not engaged. But if you do love someone you can't help but pray for them. You will find it easier to pray for the people you love the most. You ask God's grace and blessings to be upon their life and when they're going through difficulty, it is quite natural to go to the Father and say, "Please help them, please take care of them, please deliver them." Love propels you to your knees and to the Father in prayer. But you can pray and not have love, so Peter says, "Above all things, love."

Then he describes this kind of love.

II. Fervent Love

“The Greek word here translated ‘fervent’ means literally ‘stretched out.’ The idea is that of a love that is extended to reach the one loved. It is the act of one who, instead of living a self-centered life, gives of himself to others.” (1 Peter 4:8, *Wuest Commentary*)

The illustration is someone is in desperate need and they’re clinging to life, like over the edge of a cliff, and you stretch out as much as you can to reach them, to grab them and pull them to safety. This is the concept behind the word *fervent*. “It is the act of one who, instead of living a self-centered life, gives of himself to others.” This is the command of how we are to love. We are to unselfishly stretch ourselves out to one another, brothers and sisters, to the church, to the community of faith. We are to stretch.

We are to move ourselves out and place ourselves in a vulnerable position. When you’re stretched out, you’re vulnerable; you’re not able to defend yourself.

When I learned to box as a kid, they taught us how to first defend from blows and how to position properly to do that. But when you’re stretched out there is no defense. You’re open to attack. Peter is saying this is the way God wants us to love one another. We extend ourselves to that person even at the risk of that person rejecting us.

When we start talking about loving one another we get a little bit tense inside. We may not show it physically but there’s something on the inside that gets a little alarmed because love always runs the possibility of loss.

In fact, real loss can only occur when you dare to love someone more than you love yourself. You don’t lose when you don’t put anything out. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Love puts itself out there in such a way that it can suffer loss. This is why there is so little love, not just in the world, but in the church. We are afraid to love like this text tells us to.

For this message to have any relevancy to you, you have to be real with yourself. We have a general concern for one another, we do care, we have some interest in one another, but Peter is not talking about being interested in knowing how someone is doing. Rather, he is talking about a love that denies self in order to bless the other. That’s scary. That’s really frightening because at that moment you have to let the walls down in order to extend yourself beyond the perimeters you have established as a defense mechanism. You have to tear down the walls you have built in

order to protect yourself from hurt and rejection and you have to simply say, “I’m going to do it regardless of the cost.”

I think so many of us find it difficult to genuinely love like this because we’re afraid others will not love us if they really get to know us. To love the way Peter has commanded the church is to love as Jesus said, “As I have loved you, love one another.” This degree of love that Jesus said would characterize His people, “by this shall all men know you are My disciples, that you love one another” is scary. It’s risky because it requires closeness and intimacy. It requires you to be who you really are and the other person to be who they really are and still regard one another with this quality called love.

Isn’t that what a husband and wife pledges to do? “For better or worse. For richer or poorer. In sickness and in health. No matter what happens, no matter what I discover you are down deep on the inside, I am, on this day, the day of our wedding, coveting, pledging myself to you. Regardless of what I discover about you I am going to give myself away to you.” This is what Peter says is to happen in this dynamic we call the community of faith.

We are to put ourselves out there. The risk is that our brothers and sisters will discover we’re not as righteous or holy or spiritual as they think we are or we would like to think we are. The truth is none of us are as spiritual or as holy or as righteous as we appear here. I’m not. It’s easy to be spiritual when you’re doing what I’m doing right now. It’s easy to love God when we singing, “Amazing love, how can it be that Thou my God should die for me?” or “My sin, not in part but the whole, was nailed to the cross and I bear it no more.” How can you not be a little more holy right now and experience spiritual waves of God’s love upon your own soul? It’s easy to do that here. But what’s required for fervent love is an intimacy and time spent away from here that really reveals the true person, the true character. That frightens a lot of us because we fear that someone will reject us once they discover what we really are. We don’t pray as much as we let on, or we don’t read our Bible as much as we probably should, we’re not as evangelistic as we know we ought to be, and to let people see not just what we don’t do but what we *do* do is intimidating. We might lose our temper, we might say things we ought not to say, we might act easily provoked rather than not. We’re afraid, and therefore we build walls or put on masks so people cannot penetrate our real self.

Let me say you really can't love somebody until you take off the mask and tear down the walls. You say, "No, that's not correct. The person won't let me love *them* if *they* have the mask on and the walls up." That is certainly true, but it is equally true that you can't give real love if you are projecting an unreal you. If love is to be fervent it has to be real. It has to come from you, the person you really are not the persona you project. And that, my friends, is the risk of the community of faith. We will never really be a community of faith until we do this.

This is a command Peter makes to all believers in the church. Why does he command it? It's not hard to answer that question. He knows it's natural for us to not give ourselves away and stretch ourselves out one for another but rather to be a little bit guarded. He knows it's not always easy to deny yourself in order to satisfy the wants and desires of another and therefore he commands it. He commands you but he commands the person seated beside you too, therefore, it's reciprocal.

I try to exercise on a regular basis. One of the things I have to do, especially the older I get, is stretch before I exercise, that way the muscles are warmed up and it helps prevent injuries in the intensity of the exercise. And as you get older to be flexible is very important.

I'm not a very flexible person. Even when I was young, I wasn't very flexible. But I've learned that when I stretch, like touching your toes, you have to go as far as your muscles will allow you. So if trying to touch your toes you can only touch your knees, then you're in bad shape. You're not real flexible if that's as far as you can go.

But if that's as far as you can go, if you keep doing that and hold that stretch as long as you can, after a few weeks you'll find you're able to go past the knees and then if you keep that up eventually you'll make it down there around the ankles. Why? There's something about stretching out the ligaments and the muscles that increases flexibility.

It's an interesting thing that God uses a Greek word that talks about stretching in regards to love because sometimes these hearts get stiff and they don't stretch very much. Sometimes our love doesn't go very far. That's okay. You love one another to the capacity you now possess and pray that God gives you more grace and you will find your love stretching further and further and going where it has never gone before. Fervent love. Stretch out. Extend yourself.

I think another reason true love seldom is experienced is because we love ourselves more than we love one another. We don't want to sacrifice that time we indulge ourselves in order to meet the needs and wants of someone else. We're selfish. We like our time. We like doing what we want to do. It gratifies us, it satisfies us, and we're not willing to sacrifice that for another. Peter has established the fact that God saved you for a distinct purpose—so you can love others as He has loved you. This is the reason.

If you love someone and they don't reciprocate or respond, but instead reject you, it means they don't know love. They're still struggling with what it means to love because Peter says something about this kind of love. It covers a multitude of sins.

III. The Sin Covering Power of Love

“Love covers a multitude of sins.”

We may think that means love sweeps sin under the rug and refuses to call it dirt. But that's not what Peter is saying. He is saying that love *loves* in spite of sin, imperfections, and blemishes. A loved one's sin and peccadilloes, or mistakes and flaws are not reasons for love to stop loving. In fact, they are one of the reasons that love loves. Don't be quick to judge what I'm saying. Prayerfully think with me.

The Bible says in I Corinthians 13, the love chapter, that “love does not rejoice in iniquity” therefore, we are not saying that the sins of others are okay or that we celebrate one another's sins. “Love covers a multitude of sins” does not mean that. There are some sins that cannot be overlooked. When the person sinning is harming themselves or others or the reputation of Jesus Christ. But Peter, quoting Proverbs 10:12, is saying that the most loving thing we can do for a brother or sister who sins is not expose their sin but cover it, that is, don't gossip about it and tell others. Fervent love tries to conceal it. If a brother or sister loses their temper and says something they ought not to say and you hear it, love doesn't grab your cell phone and call another brother and say, “Do you know what Whitt said?! And he teaches Sunday school! Now there's hypocrisy for you!” No, not at all. Love says, “I've got to protect my brother. It's my duty because I love him to conceal that thing and make sure that no one else finds out.”

Perhaps you think you are to expose sin so that sin will be confessed and forsaken. God wants exposure and confession of sin so you make it your mission to point out the sins of others. What God wants is you to confess your own sins. But you're not to be your brother or sister's confessor for them.

Again, there are some sins whose consequences are more severe and they should be exposed. Love will expose those kinds of sins in a brother, but not to the world but to the brother who has sinned. And only after giving a brother much time to repent, if he doesn't then you must expose it someone else, but not happily but sorrowfully.

Peter is not dealing with those kinds of sins but more of the imperfections we all possess, the fallibilities and corrupt blemishes that still mar the image of Christ in us. Many of these imperfections are not sin, they're simply fallen human nature. Love covers these. This is what allows true fellowship to occur. When I get to know you and you get to know me on a more intimate level and you discover that I don't sleep in a three-piece suit and that I do sometimes go unshaven or that I sometimes don't act like Jesus, your love can cover my flaws and sins, conceal them and love me regardless. That's what this kind of fervent love does. You don't tell, you conceal.

To love a brother or sister is to take the chance to find out about their imperfections and they find out about yours. There ought to be a safety here that I can get to know Brother Gary and discover that he has a side of him that he doesn't display here because it's not proper or the time to display it here. This side of him may seem odd to me, it may seem quirky to me, it may even seem weird to me—not that Gary is weird—but the fact is, he is! And so are we. We're all weird. Why? Because we're not yet restored to the complete image of our God. There are flaws, failures, fallibilities, and sins still in this man who addresses you today and the longer I serve Him the more it seems I'm going backwards instead of forwards. I discover how really fallible I am. But the environment of the community of faith ought to afford me the ability to be myself.

It's taken a lot of years to overcome what I was taught as a young person and even in seminary. It started with my father. He taught me that you can't lead people and run with them. When I moved into Bible college and seminary I heard, "A pastor is to be cut different. You just can't hang out with people. You've got to be the leader. You're a cut above." That was drilled into us. I remember hearing one successful pastor saying, "You cannot get on a friendly level with your people, it will come back to haunt you." Philosophically, I understand what they're saying. There's a

worldly wisdom to that. The only problem with that is I don't find that in the Scriptures. I read in the Scriptures that a shepherd is supposed to smell like his sheep because he hangs around them. But when I came here many years ago I came with this philosophy I was taught from childhood. That's what was engrained in me.

I've learned over the years, looking back at that young man who came here, that one of the reasons he couldn't open up and let you see him was because he was afraid to do so. There's a reason preachers fear being real with their people. It's because they've seen churches punish pastors for being real, flawed men with feet of clay. They've seen churches run them off and vote them out with no regard for their family and wellbeing. So pastors keep your guard up.

Sometimes people you loved and would have given your life do what Judas did to Jesus; you simply say to yourself, "Everything I was taught was true. I can't run the risk of transparency." Over the years it's been really difficult. Yet the last several years the Lord has shown me that if we're going to have a community of love, I've got to put myself out there and let you see I'm a smelly sheep too. I have to let you see I still have issues in my heart and mind that I haven't overcome yet. I'm not perfect. I want to be. Oh, I want to be like Jesus. But it's going to take something supernatural to get me there. We're called to have an environment here where love covers those sins until Jesus completes our sanctification.

Again, we're not talking about sins that are damaging to the body of Christ and the reputation of Jesus and one another; no, the Bible is clear on that. If you're not concealing your brother and sister's sins and you're talking about it to others, you need to be confronted. That is a sin that needs to be dealt with because it's hurting the brother, it's hurting you, it's hurting the church. However, friends, we cannot expect perfection out of one another and truly believe we're loving one another.

Love does not demand perfection. Love covers the imperfections and the blemishes and says, "I'm going to love you anyway." That's what love does. It's, in fact, those little weird things that makes that person them and you love them for that. That's the kind of love we're talking about here.

Instead of despising someone because of their individual quirks, love rejoices in their uniqueness. That is what true love does. It delights in another for who they are: the good, the bad, the beautiful, and the ugly.

A pastor called me yesterday and was apologetic because he won't be able to make the pastors' fellowship on Thursday because he scheduled something for that day and didn't realize it. I started laughing. He said, "What are you laughing for?" I said, "I've known you for years. I don't expect anything else out of you. You're so disorganized. I know it, you know it, and I love you for it." It's what makes him him.

When two people fall in love, they think they're right for each other and they're going to live happily ever after. Then they say the words "I do" and something changes. A light switch is flipped and those little quirks that looked cute, innocent, and harmless are now like sandpaper grating on your heart. They grind you. They aggravate you. That marriage will only survive if those two people learn to accept the other person as they are, not what they were sold during courtship. What's sold in courtship is like a used car salesman who's put a coat of paint on a clunker and sawdust in the transmission. That's what happens in courtship and dating. It's all a sham, for the most part. It's not real. That's not the real person.

Finally the sales job worked and the couple gets engaged. One day they say, "I do," the real person mysteriously comes out and there they are. You wake up one day looking at that person and say, "I don't know who you are! You're not the person I married." But guess what? They're saying the same thing about you. Those people have to learn that the things they find aggravating are what make that person who they are. It's not just the good qualities but even the negative qualities that makes them the person they are. When you can actually delight in those qualities, even the negative ones, then you have crossed the threshold and started loving that person genuinely for their own selves.

That's what this text is saying. That's what "love covers a multitude of sins" means. It means I'm not going to isolate you, punish you, reject you, retaliate and get my vengeance on you, I'm going to love you and I'm going to even cover that sin with my love and I'm going to love you because that's who you are.

When somebody comes complaining to you about a brother or sister, saying, "Do you know what they said? Why do they have to be like that?" You can say, "That's just who he is, no big deal, don't worry about it." One person can see the glass empty and one sees it half full, partly because they are wired that way, partly because of your upbringing and environment but that's who they are. Love says, "I find that even fascinating about you."

You don't believe that, do you? I believe it. You know why? Because that's what Jesus does for me. He knows every crack in this clay pot. He knows every flaw. And He loves me. He has the power to get rid of everyone of those flaws at this moment but He doesn't.

We're not saying Jesus approves of our sins. Sin is sin. It's wrong. But His love is not provoked to anger or revenge, rather His love is provoked to accept me nonetheless. I have marked myself out of the Book of Life hundreds of times and deemed myself unworthy of that Book. But He never erases my name. He never crosses it out! My name is still there because of love! That's the way He loves me. He knows what I am and He understands it better than I do and He accepts me. That is love!

If you think I'm whitewashing sin then you're just going to have to leave here thinking that's one of my flaws. Think about Jesus and His disciples. The disciples fought against one another for dominance and even tried to get Jesus to choose one above the others. At one point they even had their mom come and talk with Him about it (Matthew 20:20). He saw through their pride and ambition, He knew what was going on, and even though He saw them strive with one another He continued to love them. That's what love does. That's what community does. It looks past the sins of the members to see the potential of God in one another. In true community each one loves like this.

That's what Peter is saying to you and I today. "Above all things, have fervent love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins." I even love you not in spite of your flaws but because of your flaws. That's what makes you you. I can love you like that because God loves me like that. You can love one another like that because that's the way He loved you. You can risk being rejected when you know God loves you like this.

As I conclude, I know to the non-Christian listening you might think this sounds like a pipe dream, too far-fetched to be true, it sounds like a fairy tale to think God loves you like that. I want you to understand that Jesus does hate our sins. How much does He hate them? How much is He repulsed by your sin? Look at the Garden of Gethsemane, for there in that Garden for about an hour, Jesus played with the idea of not going through with the Father's will. That's what was happening in the Garden. He played with that idea. He thought about it. And why did He think about it? Because He was repulsed by sin to the point that He couldn't stomach the idea of suffering for your sin. The Bible says the stress on Him was so strong, so powerful, and so intense internally,

that His body began to break down with the capillaries in the skin bursting, flooding the pores with blood where perspiration had been. Why? Because the thought of taking your sin upon Him, this holy, pure Son of God, was so frightening that He almost didn't go to the cross. To be rejected by His Father and not accepted by Him was almost more than He could physically bear.

That's how much He hates your sin but it's also how much He loves you because He did do it. He took the cup of your sin and drank it all. He took the cup of God's wrath and drank all of that. Why? Because He loves you. He wants you. He desires you, just the way you are. He will do the changing. He will do the fixing. He will do the repairs and the maintenance until one day you're just as pristine clean and pure as He is. You're going to give Him every reason to reject you and to cast you out of His presence but He won't do it because His love truly covers all sin. Every sin. The blood covers it all. That's why you can come to Him right now.

This is the crux. God won't reject because of your sins, He will reject you because you reject the Savior of your sins. When you come to Jesus the only way you can come is in your sinful, wicked self. That's who we are. He won't reject you because of that. But He will reject you because you reject the salvation of sin. Let me explain. Because God is so perfectly holy, so pure, so righteous, so good, He cannot just let you into His presence because of your sins and imperfections and weaknesses. So He sent His Son who became just like you and me, a real person and God's love was mediated through you and Him through Jesus. Jesus was the go between you and God. God's love comes to you through Jesus, just like a pipe carries water from the water plant to the faucet. It's a conduit. God's love comes through Jesus to you. But if you reject the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, there's no remedy. There's no solution. There's no salvation. Don't reject the love of God because your sins cry out against you and say you can't come to such a God. No! Love covers a multitude of sins! He died for those sins. If you will trust Him, He will take your sins and throw them as far as the east is from the west. He will bury them in the depths of the sea and choose not to remember them against you, ever.

I'm asking you to consider coming into the community of faith. You come here, you're a part of us, but you're not in that second world we talked about Sunday. You're not in the spiritual realm with us, only the physical realm. Come into the spiritual realm! The community wants you! With all of your imperfections we still want you. We can do that because we know we're not perfect either. We're sinners too. The community of faith can truly love one another even when we sin against one another because your sins against me and my sins against you are a living reminder

that both you and I are under the same Gospel of grace. We are standing in the same need of the love of God in Christ Jesus. So instead of your sins causing me to reject you, I ought to rejoice because it's a reminder to me that I'm not innocent either. I need forgiveness too.

When brothers and sisters sin against one another, it shouldn't cause division, love ought to kick in and say, "This is the Gospel, right before our very eyes," and it reminds me of my need for the Gospel also. That's why we need community. Without that kind of love there is no community, it's just a congregation getting together a couple times a week. "Above all things, have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins." Amen.