

SERMON FOR THE 10TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
(Cape Town - 20 July 2008)

Text: ⁷The 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. ⁹Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. ¹¹If 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 for ever and ever (1 Peter 4:7-11).

As you will have noticed, that despite a double baptism, I didn't take a sermon text today that relates directly to baptism. Instead I have taken the prescribed sermon text for this Sunday - which is great, because it really leads us the next stage (after baptism) in our Christian life.

In baptism we experience God's *unconditional* grace. To this act of grace we don't contribute in any way. This is epitomised especially by a child-baptism. As parents we just "bring" our children to God and God showers them with his love and gives them eternal salvation. But where does this lead to?

I believe the last verse of our sermon text provides us with an answer. Peter writes: "***... so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen***". In short this means, on the day of our baptism we were chosen and designated to become a people that bring praise and glory to God.

Now, how does Peter urge us to this? He urges us to glorify God (1) in and through our prayers, (2) as we love one another, and (3) as good stewards.

I

In the first verse of our text, the apostle writes: "***... be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.***"

That is a very interesting way of putting it. Peter says: "Be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray!" But reflecting on it, Peter is surely hitting the nail on the head. So often when we are overwhelmed by the issues of life, we become frantic. We run around. We do "this" or "that". And in our eagerness to get things done, we forget the one thing that really matters - and that is sharing our life with God in prayer.

Interesting in this passage, Peter does not explain "what" we should pray for, but rather concentrates on the "how". Most of the time we are far more interested in the "what". We know exactly "what" we want from God. So in these difficult economic times, when most of us battle to repay our house bonds, we pray: "God, please help me to pay my bond."

But Peter wants us to focus on the “how” of prayer and says: In our prayers we should be “clear minded” and “self-controlled”. These two adverbs used by Peter are defined in the Greek dictionary as follows: It means: “... to gain insight, in order to make good decisions.” That is the role of prayer.

Our perceptions of prayer are sometimes extremely narrow. If we hear the word “prayer” we think of fixed hours, folding or lifting our hands, possibly saying the “Lord’s Prayer” and asking God what we want from him.” Peter, however indicates: Prayer is far more than that. Prayer is a deep reflexion on life in the presence of God. Prayer is meditation, which leads to good decision making.

And remember, a good decision is not necessarily a decision that brings us personal gain or profit. But unfortunately, that is the way we are. As humans we always tend to think about ourselves first. Prayer as defined by Peter means: I reflect on a matter and consider what “God” wants. Prayer becomes a means of discerning God’s will, a help to make decisions in line with what “God” wants.

And this is how I bring glory to God. I bring glory to God through a prayer life that looks beyond my own needs and gains and considers what is important to God. Jesus is the prime example. He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Please take this cup away from me. But not as I will, but as you will.” God, what do “you” want to achieve”? What is your will? And that leads to a decision making in all aspects of life that brings glory to “him.”

This reflective prayer, forms the basis for everything else that Peter says.

II

Secondly he says: We bring glory to God by “loving one another.”

As always Peter, taught by Jesus himself, uses the Greek Word “agape”, which is a love that does not focus one oneself, but unconditionally on the other person.

This agape-love is a love that comes out of the reflective prayer in which I seek to understand whom God wants me to love. And inevitably God leads me to that person I least expect. He leads me to love that person with whom I may have the greatest tension. Peter writes: “**Love... covers over a multitude of sin**”. It is easy to love a person with whom you always agree. But Peter knows, in every community there will be tension. At some or other point people will rub against each another. But the reflective prayer, leads me to love that very person I am struggling with, to love him or her as God loves me in Christ.

God loves us sinners. I learn that in Baptism. But now God wants me to love others. And this love is not a passive love, confined to my thoughts: “I forgive you, but I don’t want to talk to you.” It is an active love. The apostle John writes: “*My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and truth*” (1 John 3:18). And he says it, because that is the way God loves. In Jesus he came to us. He shared in our lives. He covered the multitude of our sins with

his spirit of true forgiveness.

In doing the same, we bring glory to God.

Peter continues and says: "***Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.***" Hospitality was so important in ancient Israel. If people travelled, there weren't hotels and guest houses for them to stay. They depended on the hospitality of others - even that of strangers.

Being hospitable requires a lot of love. It means that I give up some of my comfort and ease and focus on the other person and what he or she needs. We have ample opportunity to be hospitable here at church. Greeting visitors, serving tea, chatting with those who are alone. And Peter says: "Do it without grumbling." See it as a way of glorifying God.

Again this is the result of reflective prayer: "God, whom do you want to touch today?" "God, I would like to invite some friends over.. Is there somebody *you* want me to invite?" This is how I bring glory to God, in allowing God to work through me.

III

Thirdly, we bring glory to God by being good stewards.

Stewardship covers a wide field. Offering hospitality is just one of them. And we know, not everybody is gifted in this area. But Peter writes: "***Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others.***"

God has entrusted his grace to us. But he has also given us gifts so that we can administer this trust well. For this purpose he has given every single Christian a gift. He has given you a gift, so that also through you his grace may reach others. Some have the gift of speaking, he says. They should speak the words of God. Others have the gift serving. They should serve with the strength that God provides.

With this statement, Peter reminds us: God does not just expect us to do something and burdens us with something we find difficult to do. No, he gifts us. As he calls us to serve others, he gives us the talents and the strength to do so.

God is glorified, by us placing our gifts and talents in *his* service. Isn't that wonderful! But we all have experienced how our fuel tank (what makes the engine run) runs out. As in a motor car, it is important to refuel for service in God's Kingdom. How do we do that?

It all starts with the realisation of what God has done for us in Christ that we couldn't do for ourselves. As we in prayer reflect on God's grace, we fuel our tanks to serve others in his name.

We also need to be careful of the wrong fuel. We take the wrong fuel, when we serve God in order to seek his favour, in order for him to listen to our prayers. Likewise we take the wrong fuel, when we serve in order to seek approval of others. Serving is not about me. It is all about the

opportunity that God gives me to glorify his name and to serve others.

To summarise: It starts with baptism. There I experience God's unconditional grace. But from baptism in leads into God-service. By serving God unconditionally with the gifts he has given me. I bring praise and glory to his name.

Look out for the small acts of service. Sometimes it is just a smile or a friendly greeting. Sometimes it is just an ear that listens compassionately. Sometimes it is just your presence that makes the a difference. But the opportunities to glorify God will be there. God provides them. Amen.

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