

li Peter - How Real Is Your Love?

by Mariano Di Gangi

Mariano Di Gangi's sermon emphasizes the importance of God's initiative in our spiritual lives and the necessity of adding virtues to our faith, culminating in love.

Duration: 35:11

Scripture: John 17:1

Topics: "Love"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher reflects on the question of what sermon he would preach if he only had four Sundays left in his ministry. He decides to focus on the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John, where Jesus is heard praying. The preacher emphasizes the importance of genuine love in our faith, stating that if we add love to our faith, we will not stumble in our spiritual journey. He also highlights God's provision for our spiritual growth, including the new birth through the Holy Spirit, the guidance of Scripture, and the support of the Christian community.

Transcript

Reading from 2nd Peter chapter 1 at the first verse. Hear now the reading of this portion of God's written and inspired word. Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours.

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of our Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises so that through them you might participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

For this very reason make every effort to add to your faith goodness. To goodness, knowledge. To knowledge, self-control.

To self-control, perseverance. To perseverance, godliness. To godliness, brotherly kindness.

And to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them he's nearsighted and blind and has forgotten that he's been cleansed from his past

sins.

Therefore my brothers be all the more eager to make your calling and delection sure. For if you do these things you will never fall and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Several years ago someone in the United States got the bright idea of polling a group of preachers and asking them to contribute a sermon of theirs to a volume that he hoped to edit called *If I Only Had One Sermon to Preach*.

Now that's quite a stumping question for a preacher to answer. If I only had one sermon to preach what would it be? In the providence of God I've been given a little more leeway than that and coming to this month of January with the four Sundays that conclude my official ministry in Knox Pulpit I asked myself the question, having just these four Sundays what should I preach? The decision was made for the morning series to expound the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John where we overhear Jesus praying, praying for himself, praying for the Apostles on whom so much would depend, praying for you and me converted down through the ages because of the witness of the Apostles. And in the evening I felt that the second epistle of Peter being such a marvelous summary of basic Christianity would be the way to go and that is why we are dealing with 2nd Peter on these remaining four Sunday evenings.

We will deal with chapter 1 tonight and next Sunday and then go through chapter 2 and focus on the third chapter on the last two Sunday evenings of the month. Notice from whom the letter comes. It comes from Simon Peter, a servant and an Apostle of Jesus Christ.

My distinguished predecessor in this pulpit, Dr. J. Glenn Owen, wrote a whole book, a very solid expository work from Simon to Peter and a whole biography can be fit between those terms. Simon is what he was. Peter is what he became by the grace of God.

A man who was unstable and impulsive, a man who made promises that he failed to keep, a man who was known for vacillation, was given a rock-like quality because of the grace of God working in his life. Simon is what he was. Peter is what he became by the grace of God.

And he's described here as a servant and an Apostle of Jesus Christ. He is a servant with a ministry to fulfill. He is an Apostle charged with authority to carry out his work.

And therefore what the Apostle has to tell us is not something that is time-bound and no longer relevant in our day, is not something that we are at liberty to amend or repeal or ignore. It is the work of a servant of Jesus Christ who is also an authentic and authorized Apostle of Jesus Christ. And if we accept his word, we are accepting the word of the one who sent him.

And if we disregard what Peter says in matters of doctrine or of duty, we are disregarding what the Lord who sent him authorized him to say. Apostolic teaching is destined to remain forever valid because the Lord so wills. So he is a servant and an Apostle.

And he writes to a group of Christians, men and women who have come to put their faith in Jesus, men and women who form part of the early church, the young church, surrounded by an environment that was dangerous to its health. A group of Christians menaced by false teaching because heresy abounded all over the Roman Empire. And a group of Christians who faced the danger of a relaxed morality that could very well slip away from the standard of the Scriptures to be conformed to this present evil age.

So the Apostle has in mind protecting the Christian community from false teaching and evil morality. Now right at the very beginning of his letter, and it's a short letter but a very potent letter, he emphasizes God's initiative. He dwells on what God has done and promised to do.

And then he gets around to the matter of our response to God's initiative. Now what is it that God has done? What are the steps that God has already taken in your direction and mine? Well in verse 3 we are told about God's provision for our good. His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

God has made abundant provision for us. He has given us all we need in order to come spiritually alive. By nature we are dead in trespasses and sins.

That's an unflattering diagnosis but it's absolutely accurate. By nature we are dead in trespasses and sins but God provides new life. In his divine power he has given us everything we need to come alive.

And that is what the scripture calls the new birth. That if a man is born again by the power of the Holy Spirit of God, he begins to live. He begins to live in fellowship with God.

He begins to live under the lordship of God. His life acquires an entirely new quality because of the new birth. It is also compared to an act of resurrection.

True there will be a bodily resurrection at the end but there is a spiritual resurrection that takes place when we pass from death unto life, from darkness to light, when we go from self to Christ. And God has taken the initiative and has provided all that we need in order to come alive spiritually. A new birth rising from a deadness and trespasses and sins.

And so we become partakers of the divine nature. Does that mean that we are deified? Does that have anything to do with the divinization of our humanity? There are people given to the New Age cult and Shirley MacLaine's kind of expensive fantasies who begin by saying I am at one with God and end up shouting on a deserted beach I am God. Is that what he's talking about? That we become partakers of the divine nature, that we transcend our creaturely human limitations somehow, that we get absorbed into a divine world soul? Not at all.

He's not speaking here of the divinization of our humanity. He is speaking of the derivation of our new nature which comes from God. He is the Lord and giver of life and he causes us to be reborn, he causes us to revive, he revitalizes us.

All we need in order to come spiritually alive comes from God. He has provided for this. He's not only given us the provision of life but he has given us everything we need to live a life of godliness.

Once we are born again, we must let the life of God in us blossom out in terms of godliness. And what are the things that God has given us to make godliness a possibility? Let me suggest that God has given us three things in order to help us to lead a life that is godly. First of all, he's given us the scriptures.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light to my path. That's not merely a verse we should quote, it's a sense of direction that we should follow. God has provided the roadmap by which we discern the path to take.

He's done more than give us a roadmap, he's filled the tank so that we can get moving. He has given us the fullness of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is our directive, the Holy Spirit is our dynamic.

God has provided all this. It is not our deserving, it is not of our doing. He has provided what it takes for us not only to live but to live a godly life.

He has also provided the society of Christians, the community of believers that we might encourage one another to stay on track and to follow the road that is narrow but leads to the fullness of life. And so there is amazing grace in this statement of the Apostle that God has taken the initiative and he has provided all that we need to come alive spiritually and to live a life of godliness. Sometimes we talk about the Reformed faith or we refer to Calvinism or we make a reference to Augustinianism.

Well, all of these things have one thing in common, they all focus on the initiative of God. God has done all this for our good and what we have to do is to respond to his gracious initiative. Not only is there God's provision but there are God's promises.

We are told in verse 4 that God has given us his very great and precious promises. Scripture is filled with the promises of God. Granted there are conditions attached to those promises and we have a way of overlooking those conditions while claiming the promises.

And yet scripture is filled with promises. The promise of the forgiveness of sins. If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The promise of peace. If we are justified through faith in Christ we will have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Or the promise of joy or the promise of an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled reserved for us in heaven.

The promises of God abound in the Scriptures and through holding fast the promises of God with the hand of faith we escape the corruption that is in the world through evil desires. And on the other hand we are equipped to enter God's everlasting kingdom. So Peter continues on the theme of God's initiative.

The provision God has made for our new life and the promises God makes to his people. But he goes a step further for he speaks not only of the promises and the provision of God but also of his prerogatives. He has called us according to verse 3 and then that is repeated again that we are to make our calling and election sure.

Election and calling are prerogatives of God that are also descriptive of his undeserved initiative of grace toward us. We are called of God. Called to what? Called to repentance.

Called to faith. Called to obedience. Called to fellowship with him.

And the scriptures of the Old and New Testament are replete with examples of men and women who heard the call of God. Long before they ever called on him for help he was calling them his lost sheep by name. It wasn't Abraham in the paganism of Ur of the Chaldees who first sought God.

It was God who reached down from highest heaven, tapped him on the shoulder, spoke his name, Abraham, I want you and if you put yourself in my hand I will make something of you that you could never imagine. It is God who calls Andrew and Peter, James and John. It is God who summons Matthew from his collector's booth.

It is God who calls Mary Magdalene from a life of subjection to demonic power. It is God who calls men and women to himself. I still remember very distinctly at the beginning of the Great Depression, the mother of all recessions, when in the year 1930 my grandfather heard the call of Jesus Christ and he answered it and it made a tremendous difference not only in his own living habits but served to introduce my father, my mother, my aunt, myself, my brother to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

He is the God who calls and he calls his sheep by name. He's not only the God of vocation, the God who calls, but the God of election and some people think that is very unfair that God should not elect everybody. The fact of the matter is that he is under obligation to elect no one.

For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. For all we like sheep have gone astray and we have turned everyone to his own way and for him to exercise grace, for him to put forth love, for him to reach out in mercy and compassion toward any who should be the objects of his judgment is a sheer unmerited and immense act of love. He has chosen.

We do not know whom he has chosen, therefore we must go and preach the gospel to every creature. We do not know whom he has chosen, therefore we must go and seek to make disciples of all nations. It is not for us to discriminate or bypass anyone.

We are to offer the gospel to all, but we do so in the knowledge that God, without our deserving, in his infinite grace has taken the initiative not only to make provision, not only to give promises, but to exercise his prerogatives. Behind the call of God is the electing everlasting call of God, his choice of men and women to come into a saving relationship with his Son Jesus Christ. And so Peter stresses the initiative of God.

This may be humbling to your pride and mine, but that's just the way it is. Salvation is from start to finish 100% the work of God, and that is the glory of the reformed faith to recover that tremendous truth from the rubble and the remains of humanism. Now what about our response to God's initiative? Peter makes it plain that the starting point is faith.

Right at the very beginning in verse 2, he says, you have received a faith as precious as ours. The Apostle and those to whom he writes both share a common faith in Jesus Christ. He is the focal point, like the hub of a wheel and all the spokes coming from the circumference bearing in upon that hub.

Jesus Christ is the hub. He is the center. He is the focal point, and believers from every time and every place focus on him.

It is by belief in the Lord Jesus Christ that Jew or Gentile, male or female, young or old, bond or free, can ever be saved. And so it begins with faith, but it must not finish with faith. That's the bridgehead.

That's the starting point. And the Apostle says, if you want to be progressive Christians, you've got to add to that faith. You've got to augment it.

You've got to let it work its way out like yeast in a measure of dough. So faith is only the starting point. To that faith, we must add godliness.

And by godliness, the Apostle means a strong, virtuous commitment to avoid what is morally evil and earnestly and vigorously to pursue that which is good in the sight of God. To our faith, we must add godliness. And to our godliness, we must add knowledge.

Over and over again in these first 11 verses, the Apostle Peter refers to the matter of knowledge. Where do we gain our knowledge? Is it from some kind of hunch, some sort of religious, sentimental, subjective guesswork? The only sure source of our knowledge is the Word, the written Word. Through the scriptures, we come to know the truth about God.

Through the scriptures, we come to know the truth about ourselves. Through the scriptures, we come to see the depth of our depravity. Through the scriptures, we come to learn what our duty is.

Through the scriptures, we rediscover our lost destiny. To gain knowledge, we need to become students of the Word, people of the book, in the highest sense of the term. But it's not only from reading the written Word, it is from fellowship with the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, that we gain knowledge.

We are to know him and to experience the working of the power of his resurrection in our lives. It's an experiential thing. It is a matter of a relationship to him.

And that is the way we gain knowledge, and we are to grow in that knowledge. And then there's the matter of self-control, a disciplined life, achieving self-mastery, keeping our impulses in check. That too is part of the development and the outworking of our faith.

What about perseverance? In our Christian life, we're not going to be immune from trouble, trial, temptation, or tears. In our Christian life, we're going to have to put up with adversity, and we're going to have to face adversaries. And that requires perseverance.

The perfect example of that sort of perseverance is found in Jesus Christ. And that is why the author of the letter to the Hebrews begins his magnificent twelfth chapter, after the roll call of the heroes of faith, saying, Let us run with patience, let us run with persistence, let us run with perseverance that does not flag the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and the finisher, the Alpha and Omega, the A through Z of this kind of perseverance that I'm talking about, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despised its shame, and now having successfully completed his course, is set down at the right hand of God. And let there be added godliness.

Let's define godliness once again so that we don't forget it. It's the sort of conduct that issues from an attitude of reverence toward God. Godliness is a lifestyle that takes God seriously and lets him be God and not an idol that we can manipulate for our good.

There's an interesting verse that is often overlooked when people quote sections of Ephesians 5 and 6. You know, that's the passage where feminist hackles are raised as the Apostle says, Wives, be subject to your husbands, as the church is subject to the Lord, and so forth and so on. And then there's a word for husbands later on. But the preface to that has to do with reverence or godliness of life.

Let everything that you do, says the Apostle, be done out of reverence for Christ. And it is out of reverence for Christ that a woman is to fulfill her duties toward her husband. It is out of reverence for Christ that a man is to fulfill his sacred responsibilities toward his wife, even to the extent of self-sacrifice.

It all stems from reverence for Christ, supreme submission to the Lordship of Jesus, doing what he asks rather than insisting that we get that which is our right, fulfilling our responsibilities out of reverence for him. That is godliness. And let there be brotherly kindness added to our godliness.

We must never forget that the Christian Church is meant to be a family. We must never forget that the Christian Church is meant to be an association of brothers and sisters who are on the same pilgrimage, destined to share in the same inheritance. Many references can be given in this effect, but I'm only going to concentrate on one, taken from the sixth chapter of the letter to the Galatians.

What does Paul say? He says, if a brother or a sister be overtaken in a fault, you who consider yourselves to be more spiritual, restore such an one in a spirit of meekness, remembering that you were just as frail and today it was him and tomorrow it may be you. We are members of a family and there must be brotherly kindness as we are concerned to restore those who have lapsed. And also, we must do good to all men, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

And the final link in the golden chain is this, add to all of this love. Why? Because love is at the root of all that we have been saying. If you have love in your heart, the kind of love that believes all things, bears all things, hopes all things, and endures all things, you are sure to have brotherly kindness.

If you love God and you revere the Lord Jesus Christ with an adoring affection, you will show godliness. If you love the Lord and you do not want to disappoint him by your failure, you will persevere in the way of right conduct. You will exercise self-mastery over your impulses and not be given to addiction.

If you love the Lord, you will study his word and increase in knowledge. If you love the Lord, you will trust him even more and your faith will become stronger. And therefore, we must ask ourselves the basic question, is our love real? If we add to our faith and culminate with the link of love, we will not be like those who are described as lacking in insight, lacking in gratitude for the forgiveness of their sins in the past.

But if we do these things, then we will not be ineffective, then we will not stumble in the race of life, but we will have an abundant and rich entrance into God's everlasting kingdom. Notice the Apostle doesn't say, if on a Sunday evening service in downtown Toronto you discuss these things. He says, if you do these things, then you have the assurance of your calling and your election.

Then you know by the response that is genuine that you have indeed locked into the initiative of God and the whole matter rings true in your own heart of hearts. What does he mean when he says that you gain a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by doing these things? Here's a sailor whose ship is wrecked on a reef. Everything is lost at sea and he makes it by the skin of his teeth, holding on to a plank, and finally comes almost unconscious and dazed to shore.

But on the other hand, there is someone who has a ship laden with tribute, which he is bringing into the everlasting kingdom in honor of him who is the master, the royal son of God. Some people are saved by the skin of their teeth as by fire through shipwreck, but others by the cultivation of these Christian graces, adding according to the prescription of the Apostle, these bring in a rich treasure as tribute to the King when they enter his everlasting kingdom. And that's the way it ought to be with you and with me.

May the same Spirit who inspired Peter in the writing of these words inscribe them upon the tables of our hearts, give us understanding, and enable us to obey in this new week of the Lord's grace. Let us pray. Lord, we thank you for faith.

We thank you for love. We thank you for everything in between. Enable us to cultivate this garden of graces, and so at the last present to you that which will bring you joy and pleasure.

Enable us to have a rich welcome into your eternal kingdom, and yours alone will be the honor and the glory. Amen.

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