

Stewards of Grace

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[0 : 00] Well, as you heard in the Bible readings, we're not actually doing Galatians today. We are taking a bit of a break, a very short break from Galatians, and we are looking at 1 Peter.

And you might be wondering, well, what is the connection with Galatians? And we're going to see one big one, but another one that we might have ignored is that Galatians gives Peter some very bad press, doesn't it?

Peter looks bad in Galatians. He is somebody who is compromising. He is actually, in a small way, forsaking the gospel. But 1 Peter rehabilitates Peter when we read about him.

He is the leader of the church that leads it through hardship and suffering. In fact, this letter is written to a suffering church, and it talks about the vision of the gospel.

And how that strengthens us to go through times of suffering. Suffering for faith is very much in the news this week, isn't it? The man in Afghanistan, Abdul Rahman, is on trial right now for rejecting Islam 14 years ago.

[1 : 18] And for holding to his Christian faith. And if he is found guilty, he will receive the death penalty. And this has garnered all kinds of attention from world leaders.

Now, there are two big pieces of evidence against Abdul Rahman. One is that he was carrying a Bible when he was arrested, and he believed the Bible.

And secondly, he refuses to renounce his Christian faith. Now, the prosecutor in this case has said, very simply, this problem can go away.

I will drop charges if Mr. Rahman rejects his Christian faith and repents and goes back to Islam. But, of course, Abdul refuses to go along with this.

In fact, this week he publicly said, I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in Christ. I am a Christian. Now, that's not the right thing to say if you want to get acquitted.

[2 : 24] These are words that are the very reason that the world around him wants him dead. His family, the police, the judge in the case, the jailers, and many people who are out to kill him even if he gets released.

He is in extreme danger. He is in crisis. And those two things that are causing a problem for Abdul is the reading of the Bible and the proclaiming of his faith in Jesus.

Now, that's exactly why we're here this morning, isn't it, at St. John's. We are here to listen to God's word. We are here to proclaim the gospel, the good news of what he has done for us.

And so it's a good time to ask ourselves, what if we, as a church, suffered simply because what we believe? Simply because we believe in the Bible and we stand up for our faith.

Would we be strong enough to persevere and stand firm as Abdul Rahman is in his personal life? Well, this is the test that the church that Peter is writing to is going through.

[3 : 42] And Peter teaches them in these marvelous and very practical five verses of 1 Peter 4, 7 through 11. He teaches them what the church must do to be strong and healthy enough to proclaim Jesus even in the worst of times.

And so I invite you to look at that passage on page 218. And basically, if you want to boil it all down to one thing, Peter is telling the churches that in order to be strong and vibrant as a church, they must be good stewards of God's grace in verse 10.

And that's our connections with Galatians, isn't it? In Galatians, we've been hearing about the grace of God. We've been hearing about the fact that nothing we do can contribute to our salvation.

It is about God's initiative, his gracious work in our lives. But Peter answers the question, what do we do about the grace that has been poured out on us in Jesus?

And that's why Peter says, be good stewards. Steward is not a word that we hear much.

[4 : 57] Unless you're on BC Ferries, you hear that word steward, and that's it. We're a little bit mystified. What does that steward do? Well, a steward in Peter's time, it was usually a servant who was entrusted with a wealth that was not their own.

And so their job was to administer that wealth according to the will of the owner of it and according to his direction. And so God's word is saying here that his grace that we have received is not ours to keep.

We don't own it. And the church must be very good at giving it away. The better the church is at allowing the grace of God to flow through it, the healthier and stronger it will be.

That was a very good illustration that Sean gave. I think it would be better if he held up that sieve a little higher. You get a sense of how that flows out everywhere. David Short used another image in the vestry meeting.

He talked about the church either being a swamp or being a river. And what he meant by that is that swamps are places where water runs into it, but it tends to stay there and stagnate.

[6 : 19] And the swamp is something for the church to avoid. We are not to be places that receives good things but don't pass them on. That's what makes for a stagnant, lifeless church.

We should instead be very good at passing God's grace on to one another and to those outside St. John's. In other words, allowing God's grace to flow through us like a river.

And that's what Peter is talking about in this passage. God's grace should never stop with you and me. God says the very opposite. If it has been poured into our lives, it must flow out of each of our lives as well.

Well, Peter is a very practical man. This is one of the great things about reading this letter. And he gives us three marks of a good steward.

In fact, he's saying these are actually the three marks of the church, the essential things that the church should be about. And he says that there is a real sense of urgency about this as well because the day of the Lord is at hand.

[7 : 23] In other words, we are going along in history next to the end of the world. We are close to Jesus coming, breaking in to our lives, into our world at any moment.

When the world will end, when Jesus will come in his glory. He says there's an urgency. He wants the church to be ready for that day. He wants the house to be in order.

He wants us to be a strong church that perseveres to that day. And so he says these three things. He says, first of all, be good stewards.

In order to be good steward of grace, you must pray. You must pray. And so verse 7 says this. Keep sane and sober for your prayers.

Now, in the gospel, the word sane is used to describe a person who is in their right mind. As contrasted to somebody who is possessed by a demon.

[8 : 21] And it's about, therefore, being clear-minded. About not being flustered about things around you and in chaos. But having the mind of Christ. Seeing things from God's perspective.

And then the word sober is about being watchful. It's about being alert to God. It's about the opposite of being under the influence of the cares and values of the world.

And by the worries of the future. So there's a real sense that Peter is saying that we are to be aware of God. And to be aware of who you are in relation to him. It's about cutting through the fog and the haze of the many priorities of the world.

And being completely clear about our one great purpose. And that purpose is that each of us were designed to be in fellowship with God.

It's why Jesus came to die for us. For the forgiveness of sins. Because of what we are made for. Relationship with God. Relationship with God. Fellowship with him. And so when we pray privately and we pray together as a church family.

[9 : 29] We are in these small groups and large groups and individually living out that purpose. In a sense God's grace that comes first.

That brings us into fellowship with him. Is being expressed in prayer. We are returning that grace of fellowship back to God through our prayers.

It's a marvelous way that God's grace is flowing through us. And there is grace also poured into the church through our prayers as well. And I know that many of you have experienced this.

The grace of being prayed for by other people. It is humbling. And it is wonderful to know that people are holding you up in prayer by name.

It deepens your faith to experience the power of God at work in your life. Because other people are praying for you. And to see those answers often in very unexpected ways.

[10:30] And for the church itself there is also a unity and a strength that comes when we pray together privately. And together in large groups for the same purpose. For the same things that we are praying for.

And at St. John's it is right for us to make prayer the mark of our church. To make it the central priority of our life together.

This is an area that we want to grow in at St. John's. And we have seen this ministry of the church strengthened. That's why we have opportunities to pray together in church.

The first Tuesday of every month we come together. Everyone is invited to pray for many aspects of the church. For an hour together. That is a strengthening time in the church.

But also we have whole days set aside. Quarterly at least in the church. In fact two weeks from yesterday on April 8th. We have another day set aside to come to the church.

[11:32] And pray in segments of one hour. You see God's word to each of us. Spurs us on to pray. To be determined and single minded.

To be about the ministry of prayer. This will strengthen the church mightily. It will strengthen your faith. It's what brings vibrancy to our Christian life.

Now secondly. Being a good steward of grace. Not only means we pray. It means we love. Peter is very simple about this. He says above all.

In other words. This is the thing that you hold above all values. That we would hold unflinchingly. You are loved for one another. Since love covers a multitude of sin.

In verse 8. Above all love. And the translation that we have here. Is a bit weak here. Because the original word. For that kind of love.

[12:30] That we should have for one another. Is one that is stretched. Or extended. So it's saying. Have a deep. Sincere. Stretched. Love. For one another.

And he says this. Because it is God's love. That extends our love. It is God's love in Jesus. That deepens. And expands our own love.

And it's why Peter prays. That we might grasp. How high. And long. And deep. And wide. Is the love of Christ. There is a call here. To increase. Our love.

For one another. And. It is a love. That actually. Calls us. To. Be about. Reaching out. To those. Who we don't naturally.

Like very much. Or who have sinned against us. That's the love. That stretches us. Isn't it? If you want to get the full force. Of Paul's call. For stretching. Love. Imagine.

[13:24] A person. Who you dislike. In this church. I'm not going to leave you a long time. To think about that. That's a good thing. We can't read each other's minds. But imagine a person.

Who you dislike. In this church. Very much. And now imagine. What it would be like. To be about. Their best interest. To pray for them.

To see what you can do. To spur them. On. To be the best. That God intended them to be. And to want for them. What you want for yourself. It's a bit of a shocking thing.

This is love that goes against the grain. And it begins to get at the constant stretching love. That Peter is talking about. In this verse.

It is the giving away. Of God's grace. Given to us first. In Jesus Christ. And it's very interesting. That Peter says. At the end of that verse.

[14:21] That love covers. A multitude. Of sins. And let's not misunderstand. What Peter is saying here. He is not saying. That love condones. Sin.

Or hushes up. Sin. Peter is referring. To the Old Testament. A place in Proverbs. Where it says. That hatred. Stirs up strife. But love. Covers all sin.

See that contrast. Hatred. Deliberately. Deliberately. Exposes sin. In order to humiliate. Or hurt. Or gain revenge. But stretching love. Is the opposite.

It promotes peace. Between people. In the church. And it looks for the best. In people. We are very prone. To take offense. Very quickly. To assume.

That it was meant. To hurt. But love. Short circuits. That offense. It assumes. That the hurt. Was not intended.

[15:17] And does not take it. As such. And even when there is. Intended sin. This love. Discourages. Needless talk. About sin. Of others.

And this is necessary. Because all of us. In this church. Are still weak. And failing. Despite the gospel. Coming into our lives. We see a multitude. Of sins. Around us.

That's what Peter is saying. But we contain. That sin. With deep love. We contain it. When we direct. When we deal directly. With a person. Who has offended us. We keep it.

Under wraps. As it were. In this way. We don't allow the sin. To spread. And become public. It is covered. By the love. That God has given to us.

And so Peter gives. One example of love. To show us a little bit. About what this looks like. It's in verse nine. And he gives the. The example. Of offering hospitality.

[16:13] And probably. He uses that. Because hospitality. Was necessary. In the early church. But an ancient proverb. Said that. Having a guest. Is like. Keeping fish.

It goes bad. In about three days. Starts to stink. And. They knew. That there was something. Very disruptive. And costly. And irritating. About hospitality.

It could. It could be something. That was an incredible. Inconvenience. And there was a great temptation. To fall into. Being grudging. Or murmuring. Is the right translation.

For this. And. Peter talks about. Murmuring here. Because. He says that. Love will silence it. And you know. That murmuring. Is a problem. For God's people.

Throughout the Bible. Throughout the Old Testament. And New Testament. Christians. And the people of God. Have murmured. Against leaders. And against one another.

[17:09] But when Christians. Practice stretching love. We actually. Pour grace. On each other's failings. And this will always. Strengthen the faith. It will strengthen the church.

Because sin. Is contained. It is covered. By the love of God. Now the passage. Ends by saying. That not only do good stewards. Of God's grace.

Not only do they. Pray. And love. The third thing they do. Is serve. And again. This is a grace. That comes from Jesus. Jesus says.

I did not come to be served. But to serve. And to give my life. As a ransom. For many. And I think in some ways. This priority. Of the church.

Is the most difficult one. For us. Because our cultures. Our culture. Really infects us. We are consumers. Along with the rest of our culture. Whether we like it or not.

[18:06] And so we come to church. Thinking about. How will my needs be met. And we look for good preaching. For good teaching. For good music. And fellowship.

And pastoral care. And all of these are good things. But Peter turns our attitude. Upside down. And says that we ought to come to the church.

With the very purpose. Of serving. This is the attitude. We come to church. How can I give? And I think it was wonderful. Last month.

When we did the count me in. How many people signed up. For new ministries. New ways. To serve one another. It is an example. Of what Peter. Is talking about here.

What kind of attitude. God calls us. To come to the fellowship. Of the church with. And that's why verse 10 says. As each has received. A gift. Employ it.

[19:01] But the better translation. Is minister it. To one another. As good stewards. Of God's varied grace. And the thing in the original.

Is that there is a challenge here. There are two words. That are emphatic. That Peter uses. And that is. Each one. Is emphatic.

Peter is underlining. The fact that. Each person. Is in fact. A minister. Of grace. In the church. Each one. Has a gift. That God has given.

Just for the purpose. Of serving. He has given us grace. To serve. And no one. Is left out. You know. If you look at your parish life notes.

Often what we have. Is a list. Of the ministers. Or some of the ministers. Of the church. On the front cover. And in order to be. Biblically accurate. According to what Peter.

[19:56] Is saying here. We should list. Every member of the church. In that list. Of ministers. Now that's a. That's a pretty big. Parish life note sheet. So we don't do it.

But that is. Radically. What God. Is calling us to. Here. Is what is clearly. Saying here. That we are all. Meant to be ministers. Ministering to one another.

This is a lively. Strong church. That does this. And I think. There's probably. A couple of things. That. Keep us. From accepting this.

And believing this. And the first is. That. I don't have the skills. Necessary. To be a minister. Moses. Was the one. Who popularized this.

You know. He said. When he was sent to Pharaoh. I talk in a halting way. I'm not a respectable. Kind of guy. He won't listen to me. And of course. God gave him grace.

[20 : 50] To do it. And the second. Objection is. Let the professionals. Take care of it. You know. We have people. That are paid. And trained. To do that. We have people.

That are more gifted. Than I. Therefore. I really shouldn't. Be about being a minister. Well again. In the Old Testament. Onwards. We see this happening.

We see. A group of people. Who are priests. Who are there. In order to minister. To the people. God's grace. But Peter says. Earlier in this. In this letter. That we.

Are a royal priesthood. All of us. Are called in. To that ministry. To one another. And so. What Peter does here. In talking about. Stewards of grace.

Is that he. Is pulling the rug. From under the. Those objections. That I just mentioned. He is saying. That those who minister. Look at. As we go further down. In the.

[21 : 44] In the. Passage here. He says. Those who minister. By speaking. And that can be. Evangelism. Teaching. Preaching. Leading bible studies. And those who minister.

By rendering service. And that might be. Pastoral care. Or doing administrative. Or support work. Or just caring for others. In practical ways. They only do it.

By the grace of God. In his strength. By his mercy. And so. He says here. That you don't actually. If you are speaking. You're not saying anything. Original.

Something that is very clever. In fact. You are simply. Passing on. What God has already said. And if you are serving. It's not in your own strength.

In your great ability. To be able to be. Empathetic with people. Or to be caring. It is through the strength. That God supplies. As Peter says.

[22 : 38] And it's deeply humbling. To know this. We are simply. God's grace. It's flowing through us. It tells us. That it is God. Who makes us ministers.

Of his grace. It is him. Who gives us. What is needed. To serve him. And so that makes us. Ask the question. It's a good question. To close with. In what way.

Am I a minister. At St. John's. How am I a steward. Of God's grace. This is a. This is a very challenging. Passage. For us. At St. John's.

Because being a steward. Of God's grace. Turns our life. Upside down. And so. It means our purpose. In the church. Is to give away. God's grace. That he has entrusted.

To us. When we do this. As we pray. And as we love each other. And as we serve. One another. As ministers. Of grace. The powerful thing.

[23 : 31] In all this. Is that Peter says. In all of these things. God is glorified. In Jesus Christ. And he says that. Because it is his grace. That makes all of this happen.

We are simply open. To allowing it. To flow through us. To others. And a church. That looks like this. Is a church. That is ready. To meet Jesus. When he comes in glory.

Even in great suffering. It is a church. That will persevere. And strongly. Proclaim Christ. To him. Belong glory. And dominion.

Forever and ever. Amen.