

Stretchy Love

1 Peter 4:7-11

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer (see right) is a hero by any measure. One biography on him has the subtitle, *Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, spy*. Here's a quick sketch of his life. He was raised in a famous and intellectual family in Germany. His dad was the most famous psychiatrist in the country. His brothers and sisters were renaissance types: academics, artists, culture-shapers. As an example, his brother worked with Albert Einstein to crack the atomic code.



Bonhoeffer took his intellect and applied it to theology. He had his Ph.D. by 21. He taught theology at the University of Berlin. As the Nazis rose to power, he became an outspoken critic of Hitler and the socialist philosophy he preached. As the Lutheran church in Germany aligned with the Nazis, Bonhoeffer left and formed the Confessing Church of Germany. That was basically an underground church in Germany during World War II. He formed three seminaries which were also covert. These seminary students lived together, worshiped together, learned together. Bonhoeffer was their teacher. By all accounts, the Christian community experienced in these covert seminaries, dare I call them *exile* seminaries, under these conditions of war was very special.

This led Bonhoeffer to write a book, a classic on Christian community called *Life Together*. In it he speaks of the powerful experience of healthy and vibrant Christian community. Bonhoeffer's ethical dilemma was whether to participate in an assassination attempt on Hitler. If you saw the movie *Valkyrie* a few years ago, those were Bonhoeffer's associates. Dietrich was arrested. Hitler and Himmler personally ordered Bonhoeffer executed. He died by hanging on April 9, 1945 at the age of 39. Hitler was dead three weeks later. Since Bonhoeffer died a martyr, what he wrote carries the power of a martyr's words. I will be referring to this book throughout this message.

But let's see what the Apostle Peter says about the life qualities of a healthy church in 1 Peter 4:7-11. Last week we zeroed in on verse 10 and service in the church. This week I want to look at this passage as a whole. See where it sits. In verses 1-6 Peter describes the illicit and immoral lifestyle of the pagan world around them. It is human passions without moral constraint. He calls it, "*a flood of debauchery.*" (verse 4) We live in the same flood today. People are stunned when we don't join or idealize the immoral lifestyle. See verse 5, but they will give an account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. Peter is looking at the big picture. *Yeah, that party was crazy awesome and that fling was so much fun.* But they are oblivious to one terrifying reality—God will judge them in eternity for their sinful rebellion. Now in contrast to the out of control world around them, Peter admonishes them:

"The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." (1 Peter 4:7–11 ESV)

It's easy to see the four qualities of Christian community that set it apart from the world around it: a self-controlled life of prayer, love that overcomes interpersonal offenses, openhearted hospitality, and stewarding giftedness in the direction of one another.

Self-controlled Life of Prayer

"The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers." (Verse 7)

"The end of all things is at hand." This was written 2,000+ years ago. We could read that and think that Peter had his timetable off. But Peter is not speaking in terms of chronological time, but redemptive time. In redemptive history, we are in the last days. Everything that had to happen has happened. The next things to happen in God's plan are those associated with the end of time, final judgment, and eternal life or eternal judgment.

The pagans' world ignores where we are in redemptive history, but Christians see it differently. This reality makes us more serious-minded about things that really matter. Like when someone gets the report that they have cancer; suddenly life is more serious and precious. What is coming makes today really important.

Someone asked Luther what he would do if he knew today was the day Jesus was coming back. He replied that he would plant a tree and pay his taxes. What was he saying? We should live everyday faithfully in the calling God has for us. Spiritually, what is about to happen should make us sober-minded and self-controlled. See why? *"For the sake of your prayers."* (Verse 7) Phillips translates this, "be calm, self-controlled men of prayer."

I think of all the Christian activities that require self-control, prayer is the toughest. What is the first thing to go on a busy day? Time in prayer. Yet, prayer is absolutely essential to the life of a Christian and the life of a church. But it won't happen without controlling other aspects of life to create margin for it.

In a few weeks I am going to share a new prayer endeavor of our church. It's different from anything we've tried before. Why? Prayer is like oxygen for a church. It's interesting that Peter lists it first in his list of healthy Christian community.

Stretchy Love

"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." (Verse 8)

I considered just doing this verse. Why? The other verses depend on this one. Perhaps that is why Peter says, *"Above all keep loving one another earnestly."* Paul prioritizes love similarly: *"faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."* (1 Corinthians 13:8) There are two reasons why love is the most important quality.

Love is what God is like

1 John 4:8 says it succinctly, "*God is love.*" This doesn't mean love is God. Rather, it is the defining attribute of who God is. Our working definition of love around here is, "*Love is self-giving for the good and joy of another.*" God is this within the Trinity as the three members of the Godhead eternally love one another. Their fellowship and unity is an experience of giving selflessness for the joy of the other.

If Christian relationships are truly Christian, they have this orientation of doing what we can for the other person's good and joy. It is the life of Christ reproduced in the life of the Christian and the church. As children of God, we love because it is the very nature of our Father to love. What is so great about this little proverb here is that it is so honest and real.

Love is what allows Christian relationships to continue

"...Keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8)

Keep on loving one another. Doesn't that suggest that "keeping on" loving is difficult? Why? We all can love short-term. We can have our splash and dash love moments. But loving the same people over the long term? That is much harder. I like the book title, *Everyone is Normal Until You Get to Know Them* by John Ortberg. To be in relationships with other Christians is to be forced to persevere in loving people different from us. Over time, those differences can wear on you. Become annoying. Exasperating. Make you hop quickly to the next church hoping that church has people less annoying than the ones you already know. Guess what you find at the next church?

Here is the beautiful help. This help is the key to any long-term relationship, whether that is friendship or marriage or a family relationship. The kind of love God births in Christians through the gospel is elastic. The Greek word for "covers" has the sense "at full stretch." Love *stretches* over a multitude of sins. Love keeps a multitude of sins from ruining Christian community. This doesn't mean that love overlooks sin. It is love that speaks the truth and admonishes and even disciplines out of the church an erring brother or sister. [See video of this message at 24:40 for visual illustration of this.]

I think what Peter is getting at is the inevitable interpersonal slights and offenses which varying personalities and preferences in the church always create. That little huffy moment when Mrs. Jones speaks out of frustration. The disappointment that no one called when Mr. Smith needed it. The failure to acknowledge an act of service. The snippy and competitive comment. The words vented in frustration. The fact that any church has any level of unity or fellowship can only be attributed to the people of the church applying stretchy love to a host of little offenses. We all say stupid things. We all do stupid things.

Bonhoeffer writes eloquently on this and talks about Christians who have a wishful dream about what church community should be like but then deal with what it actually is like.

"Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial. God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of this idealized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others, and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge one another and even God accordingly....Therefore, will not the very

moment of great disillusionment with my brother or sister be incomparably wholesome for me because it so thoroughly teaches me that both of us can never live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ? The bright day of Christian community dawns wherever the early morning mists of dreamy visions are lifting." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, pp. 36-37)

Are you disillusioned with other Christians or the experience of church with other Christians? Great! You might be on the verge of authentic Christian community. But for this to happen, love has to cover a wide variety of moments that urge us to be offended, hold a grudge, nurse a little bitterness, or simply run away.

Christian love covers those moments because its root is in Christ's love which did that. "*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" (Romans 5:8) In fact, not only did Jesus' love cover sin, it spurred him to personally sacrifice for the offensive people in the first place. This leads to his next quality.

"StrangerLove" (Hospitality)

"Show hospitality to one another without grumbling." (Verse 9)

Christian hospitality isn't having nice silverware when your friends come over. The word is a compound word. Literally, "strangerlove." *To love strangers.* This is Good Samaritan type love. He chose to care for someone vastly different from himself. Love and compassion opened his heart and his wallet to care for their needs. One commentator calls it openheartedness.

Peter adds, *Do this without grumbling.* Why add that? The kind of hospitality he is describing is inconvenient hospitality. Expensive hospitality. These are the ones that make us grumble. *This is messing with my schedule! This is so expensive! He's eating us out of house and home!*

"We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans by sending us people with claims and petitions. If we pass them by, we pass by the visible sign of the Cross raised in our path to show us that, not our way, but God's way, must be done....It is part of the discipline of humility that we must not spare our hand where it can perform a service and that we do not assume that our schedule is our own to manage, but allow it to be arranged by God." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p.99)

Who here is NOT convicted by that quote? Do you see how these go together? The Christian sees life and judgment as a summons to prayer, love, and investment in Christian community. But that community is messy with differing kinds of people and often offense-giving experiences. The Christian commits to the fellow believer out of a recognition that our unity is not based on performance or preference but the unity already established through Jesus and by the Spirit. This allows for stretchy love and "strangerlove" reflecting God's stretchy love of me, the sinning stranger.

But it goes even further. Not only am I called to stretchy love and "strangerlove," but I'm called to....

Serving Love

"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ." (Verses 10-11)

We looked at this last week in more detail. I just want you to see that you can know your love is stretchy when your love is "servy." "Servy" love. Why? *"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* (Mark 10:45)

Christian community is simply the horizontal expression of God's communing with us through Jesus

"When God had mercy on us, when God revealed Jesus Christ to us as our brother, when God won our hearts by God's own love, our instruction in Christian love began at the same time. When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with one another. When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we too were made ready to forgive each other. What God did to us, we then owed to others. The more we received, the more we were able to give; and the more meagre our love for one another, the less we were living by God's mercy and love. Thus God taught us to encounter one another as God has encountered us in Christ." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, pp. 33-34)

This is why our corporate experience of prayer, stretchy love, "strangerlove," and "servy" love are not add-ons to the Christian experience. They are revealers of whether we actually understand and believe the real gospel.

So how are we doing? How are you doing? Passages like this challenge especially the weekend attendee type who never takes a step beyond attendance at church to community in church. How could you do so here? Let's go back to the list.

Prayer?

I'll have more to share on this in coming weeks.

Stretchy Love?

Assumes relationships in which you are known and knowing others. Why not join a small group as a practical first step?

"StrangerLove"

An open heart to inconvenient and needy people. Who might God bring into your path this week? Are you prepared to be interrupted? We'd love to hear any story about this. We've created an email, strangerlove@bethelweb.org. Tell us your story.

"Servy" Love?

We have opportunities available. Visit www.bethelweb.org/serve to sign up. Remember the why in the passage, *"In order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."* (Verse 11)

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