

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

(1 Corinthians 11:33)

Introduction

Recently, a church member took me fishing on a Saturday morning. At one point, I was not as careful while casting as I should have been, and I suddenly found my line in an incredible mess. As I was trying to untangle it, my friend walked over and offered to help me. Far more experienced than I am, he quickly located a particular knot. As soon as he untangled it, the line snapped back to order.

Our text is somewhat like that. There are several one anothers in this text, but if we unknot the one in vv. 10–11, the others quickly fall into place.

First Peter is a most empathetically practical epistle. Peter writes to Christians who are suffering, most of whom were suffering away from home. They were living in the Dispersion—not only the politico-historical Dispersion that most are familiar with, but rather the Christian Dispersion caused by persecution. It was probably the persecution referred to in Acts 8:1–4.

Peter remained in Jerusalem while many were scattered abroad. He cryptically refers to this in his closing words (5:13–14). But though he was absent from them in body, he was very present with them in heart.

With such affection, he was compelled to write what is, in fact, inspired pastoral (apostolic) counsel. His primary concern was that they continue making spiritual progress amid their suffering sojourn—indeed, *because* of their suffering sojourn.

This letter contains numerous references to suffering—and also numerous references to hope. Peter desired these believers to have a living hope as they daily died for the Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the many temptations that assault us when we face difficulties is an inward retreat. This is particularly the case in an age, like ours, in which self-centred individualism reigns. When it's all about me, it's awfully hard to persuade people to think about others. It is more difficult to move outward to serve others. Sometimes this is true even in the local church. Peter seems to have been concerned about this (1:22–25; 2:1–3, 4–5, 16–17; 3:8–9; 5:5, 14).

Practically, we are tempted to stop serving when we suffer. We are tempted to the inertia and introspection. And Peter seems to have had this this concern on his mind when he penned these words in chapter 4.

Peter exhorts suffering believers to resist the temptation to turn *away* from or to have a go *at* one another; rather, he exhorts them (and, by extension, us) to draw *to* one another. And he does so in practical terms: Pray for and with one another (v. 7); continue to love one another by forgiving one another (v. 8); exercise genuine (“without complaining”) hospitality to one another (v. 9); and serve one another with the gifts God has given to each one (v. 10).

In our brief study here, I want to highlight the importance of using our God-given, God-empowered, and God-directed gifts to serve one another in our local church.

Serve One Another with God-Given Gifts

Peter urges his readers to serve one another with their God-given gifts. “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (v. 10). This means in the Greek what it means in English! It means to “wait” on one another, to attend to one another’s needs. It means to minister to one another.

We do this in many ways, but Peter narrows it here to serving one another with the use of the (spiritual) gifts that God has given to each one.

I like how the NKJV translates this: “As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another.” In more contemporary parlance, we might say, “Pay it forward.”

In his excellent book, *Favor*, Greg Gilbert tells the story of going through a drivethrough and discovering that the car ahead of him had paid the bill for his drink. The drivethrough attendant explained that it was sort of a pay-it-forward day, and his bill had been settled. Feeling good about this deal, Gilbert offered to pay for the bill of the vehicle behind him. Unfortunately, the bill was a \$35 bill! He paid it, but not very happily.

Peter wanted these believers, regardless of their difficulties, to put the welfare of others first. As God has gifted each one, each, in return, is to gift others. The gifts that God gives to each of his children is to be shared. God has blessed us; now we are to bless others with that blessing. In principle, we have been blessed to be a blessing to others.

A key phrase and concept in this verse is “as good stewards.” A steward in the ancient world was a house-distributor (i.e. manager) or overseer. The word sometimes referred to a fiscal agent, one who oversaw the funds of another. A steward, by definition, was not the

owner of the household or goods; rather he or she was responsible to take care of that which belonged to someone else. Peter reminds us that we must serve one another because the Owner of the household tells us to!

Our gifts, including our spiritual gifts, have been given to us by God to be used as he directs. They are not primarily for our own benefit; they are for the benefit of others to the glory of God.

When suffering, when struggling under great burden, sharing our gifts may be the very thing others need to help them in their difficulties. A believer facing financial trial may need someone else to use their gift of giving. A church member facing an emotional trial may need someone to use their gift of mercy. A victim of trauma or grief may require a fellow church member to use her gift of counselling. Someone facing confusion or discouragement may need another believer to use his gift of teaching.

This exhortation touches on the very destructive mindset of consumerism, which plagues the worldview of so many who claim to be Christian. This is the view that looks upon the local church as a people (or place) where “my needs may be met,” where “my wants trump any and everyone else’s wants,” where “I must be served,” and where “you had better make me happy or I am leaving.” Peter smashes this mentality with the linguistic force of a cricket bat. His exhortation is rather that Christians are to be committed contributors – passionate providers, zealous producers, not conceited consumers.

If more Christians obeyed this exhortation, there would be a lot less church hopping, for there would be many more Christians too busy being gracious to be grumbling. Peter tells us this in the next phrase: “of God’s varied grace.”

“God’s varied grace” highlights the truth that the Christian church is composed of those who have experienced God’s grace in many diverse ways. Peter is telling us that God’s varied grace to the church provides varied gifts *to* the church to be displayed *in* the church.

The word “varied” is found earlier in this same letter (1:6). It means various in character – diverse, manifold. In the context of 1:6, it is used to describe the reality that there are various trials faced by any believer. Here, we are told that there are various shades of grace. We might legitimately put these together and say that there is a shade of grace to cover every shade of grief.

Putting this together in this verse, we can conclude God’s “varied grace” is to be displayed by the use of his varied gifts that flow from that grace. And this is particularly relevant when believers are going through varied tough times.

By ministering to one another with these gifts, we manifest the grace of God. But this means also that grace is not only the means of our gifting, but also the motive for the use of our gifts in serving one another. Grace empowers us to gift one another.

Peter does not have here various Sunday “duties” –like crèche workers, security guards, door greeters, or offering ushers. As wonderfully helpful as those things are, he is concerned about Christians growing in holiness (1:15-16) amid trying times. We must use our gifts to help this growth in holiness.

How does one discover his or her gift? It’s really not that complicated: Get involved. The more you get involved in the church, the quicker you will find how God has gifted you. Do whatever you can find to do, trusting God, through his church, to show you where your gift is.

Serve One Another With God-Empowered Gifts

In vv. 11a, we see the exhortation to serve one another with God-empowered gifts: “whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies.”

Peter exhorts that our service to one another is not merely ticking a box. When we serve one another, we are not merely to go through the motions. No, we are to be motivated by God; we are to serve by the grace of God.

The speaker must do so “as one who speaks the oracles of God.” That is, he must speak, motivated by the presence of God.

The server must serve “by the strength that God supplies.” That is, she must serve, motivated by the power of God. The word “strength” speaks of ability, power, or might. The word “supplies” means to furnish. Peter wants every Christian to use their gifts to serve one another, empowered by God. He exhorts that Christians serve one another with the understanding that they need to be furnished with God’s strength if they will effectively serve.

Perhaps he still has in mind what he opened his letter with when he spoke of our being begotten to a “living hope.” Our ministry to one another is to be “alive.” It is easy to merely go through the motions. It is easy to tick the box of duty. It is easy to rely on self. But what we need is the power and the presence of God when we serve one another. In other words, we need to serve one another with a desire for godliness in the life of one another.

Clearly, among other things, this truth informs us, and should compel us, to be prayerful providers. Prayer is vital to the life of the Christian and the life of the church. John Onwuchekwa's wonderful little book—*Prayer: How Praying Together Shapes the Church*—highlights this truth.

Do you pray before you serve? Do you rely on God as you seek to relate to others? As a preacher, I know the need for this.

The story is told of a Puritan preacher who was scheduled to preach, but could not be found. A member of the congregation went to look for him and came back to report that, strangely, he was in a meeting. The congregation waited a little longer and when he still did not come out, another member went to see what the meeting was about. He stood on the other side of the door and, listening carefully, heard the preacher repeating, "I am not going out there without you." The member opened the door and found the preacher on his knees, wrestling with God in prayer.

I often pray to God before I preach that I will not go out there without him. After all, as someone has said, "Spiritual ends can only be achieved by spiritual means." So, be "spiritual" and serve.

Serve One Another With God-Directed Gifts

Verse 11 also highlights the need to serve one another with God-directed gifts: "in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

This third and last observation is inseparably linked with what has been observed above. That is, the reason we want our service to one another to be empowered by God is because all our service to one another is to be for the glory of God. Our service is to be directed by God and therefore it requires the dynamic of God.

This is a rich exhortation, which should go a long way towards motivating us to faithfully serving one another. If we keep our focus on God being glorified through Jesus Christ, and if we realise that we are the body of Jesus Christ, then we will have all the motivation we need to faithfully use our gifts to serve one another.

Peter implies that if we do *not* use our gifts to serve one another, then to some degree God will not receive his glory as he should. And this glory comes "through Jesus Christ." What does this mean?

I think he means that same thing that Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians 12. As each of us uses our gifts from God to serve one another in the body of Christ, we will look more and more like the glorious body (person) of Jesus Christ. And as this is the case, God is glorified more and more. The weightiness of God will be sensed more and more in our church and before a watching world (1 Corinthians 14:23–25).

In Corinth, there was a serious problem. There was little appreciation for the various gifts of grace. There was little appreciation for the grace of the gifts. There was little appreciation for the value of each member (12:25). There was a whole lot of consumerism and very little servant-heartedness. The Corinthians needed to heed Peter's charge as much as his own readers did.

Conclusion

Each Christian must embrace the gifts that God has provided. We must each exercise these gifts, empowered by God, for the edification of the church. As we serve one another in this way, our local church will look more and more like Jesus, our credibility with the gospel will be enhanced, and Jesus Christ will be glorified as his dominion is increasingly revealed.

But this implies that we know the grace of God in Jesus Christ. This implies that we have come through the experience of 1 Peter 1:22–23. Have you been born again? Have you experienced God's saving grace? Until you do, there is no serving grace. It is simple. We are sinners who need a Saviour, and God has provided him. He lived a sinless life, which was required of us and yet which we could never achieve. He then died in our place on the cross, suffering God's wrath for us, shedding his life's blood for all who will confess that that wrath was our deserved wrath. He then rose from the dead to grant salvation to all who will repent and who will call upon as their Saviour and Lord.

When we are born again, our Father gives to us gifts. Brother and sister, let us use those gifts to serve one another.

AMEN