

What Should Be Our Lifestyle In These Last Days?

by Ron R. Ritchie

Last week, at this very hour, on the island of Java, half a world away, Kim Anderson and I were sitting at a feast in an Islamic cemetery, waiting for the signal to begin the feast. It was a fascinating experience. We were accompanied by our dear friends, Dennis and Linda Free, who work among the people of the "high villages," as they are called, the farmers who build their homes along the sides of active volcanoes. A village elder had asked the Frees to make their house boy available to him to help him prepare the cemetery for the feast by scaring away evil spirits. The elder explained that the feast was held once a year, so that the villagers could get in touch with God. They supplied the food for the feast to show God that they were faithful; and then they would pray to Him about certain issues. Dennis told us that in his nine years among these people, he had never before been invited to this ceremony. It sounded too good to miss, so we all decided to go along, together with 300 villagers and their food.

As we sat there in the cemetery, I began to think through the passage in 1 Corinthians where Paul speaks about food offered to idols. Then I remembered that in another place, the apostle said when you are offered food, don't ask where it came from; just eat it. A tray of food lay beside each headstone, and on the tray was a rice cake wrapped in banana leaves, and another rice dish, shaped like a volcano. These rice dishes symbolized two things. First, the rice cake was to be eaten so that God would know they were keeping the feast. This ritual stemmed from some ancient law which seems to have been taken from Buddhism, Islam and animism. Secondly, the other rice dish was a symbol that they were praying that Mohammed would be allowed into heaven. While they believe that Mohammed was resurrected, they believe that he has not yet entered into the presence of God in heaven.

Then the villagers began to read and chant from the Koran. The elder told us that two things were happening here: first, they were praying to God to allow their relatives who had died to enter into heaven. This prayer had an arm-twisting quality about it, however. They were trying to show God their faithfulness by eating the rice cake, hoping that by so doing, God would grant their request. Secondly, if their relatives did in fact enter heaven, then they would become mediators who would shower blessings down upon those remaining on earth. Dennis told us that the sad part behind all of this was that the faith which they were demonstrating in these rituals was what the Javanese called "mugi mugi." It was an uncertain faith, nothing more than wishful thinking, asking God to please come through and act on their behalf, but all the time fearing that He probably would not.

What a difference we saw later that afternoon in a village high up the sides of a mountain at a Christian service with people among whom Dennis and his wife were working. The church was a dirt-floor room, with hard benches, and the congregation was made up of all ages, young and old, nursing mothers, etc. When Kim began to preach, their faces lit up with excitement as they listened intently to the translation by Dennis. I couldn't help but remark to Dennis on the contrast between the ritual in the cemetery earlier, and what we had just experienced in this little church. "Yes," he replied, "these Christians have a hope, which they call '*tem tu*'. That translates as an absolute hope; an absolute faith in the Living God." They were convinced that they were born again to a living hope because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Their hope was not "*mugi mugi*", but "*tem tu*".

This is the same hope which the apostle Peter wrote about in his first letter to the Christians in Asia Minor. These believers were suffering various political, social and spiritual trials as they sought to live a godly lifestyle in the midst of an increasingly decadent Roman Empire. In the section to which we come today, 1 Peter 4:7-11, Peter says that in light of the certainty of the second coming of Christ, these early Christians were to remain steadfast, not to quit on the hope that lay before them. Addressing the question, therefore, "What should be our lifestyle in these last days?" Peter responds by telling them that they should have, first, a lifestyle of prayer, and, second, a

lifestyle of service.

A lifestyle of prayer

Let's look at the first of these, found in 1 Peter 4:7.

The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.

"The end of all things is at hand...." I looked that up in the Greek and the Hebrew and found that it comes out exactly like it says: "the end of all things is at hand!" It means exactly that. God has given time and space for now, but there is coming a time when there will be no more time; all will be the eternal present.

In the immediate context, Peter has been talking about the coming judgment and the Judge who is ready to judge the living and the dead. This phrase has the same urgency as the judgment in Genesis 6, when God judged the sinful generation of Noah's time, and brought an end to all flesh on the earth, save Noah and his family. It has the same urgency as Jeremiah's words in Lamentations 4:17-18, when the prophet spoke of the coming Babylonian captivity. "The end of all things is at hand" has the idea of the great white throne of judgment. Then everything will be wrapped up and judgment will begin. In light of this, Peter encourages Christians that this is not a matter of fear, but of joy--the joy of Christ's second coming. Thus Christians have a living hope. That is what this letter emphasizes again and again--the joy and hope of believers, which will motivate them to hang in there in the midst of suffering.

As a young Christian, when I first heard that "the end of all things was at hand," I prayed, "Oh Lord, could you wait until I have a girlfriend?" Then that prayer changed to "...until I get a wife." Then it became "...until we have children." Then, "Can you wait until my children are married and I'm a grandfather?" Of course, as the body begins to fade, as the aches and pains increase, the prayer changes to, "Oh Lord, come quickly!" But here Peter is saying the same thing as Jesus Himself said, as Paul and John said, "Be encouraged. Christ is coming again." This is what James said also, "Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand (James 5:7-8).

Writing in 2 Peter 3:8-13, the apostle says that in the last days mockers will come saying, "Where is the promise of His coming?" Peter continues,

But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.

This is the fire in Peter's heart--the joy that he has to pass along to believers of the "coming day of God." We must remember that God does not count days and years as we count them. That always comes as a surprise to us. We feel that just about any day would be a great day for Jesus to come back.

The God who is in control of time wants His followers to have a lifestyle of power. That is the lifestyle that Peter also desires for his spiritual children. That is why he says (1 Peter 4:7), "...therefore be of sound judgment and sober spirit." Be clearheaded; don't panic, don't be irrational or illogical in the midst of your present suffering. I saw a very interesting sign in one airport in Malaysia during our trip. On these moving walkways the sign usually

says, "Watch Your Step," but the sign in Malaysia read, "Mind Your Step." Think about it, in other words. That is what Peter is saying in this section. Understand the truth of what God is saying. Because Christians are people of "tem tu" faith; because they have a living hope, they should have a sound mind about these things.

Further, they should be of "sober spirit." Don't get drunk with worry, anxiety and fear. Certainly from a human point of view, the world may seem to be coming apart; but from God's point of view, nothing is out of control.

But Christians are not to have sound judgment and a sober spirit for any ministry or any activity on a human level. They are to have these things, Peter says, "for the purpose of prayer." If you knew that the Lord was coming back at a certain time, you could come up with a whole lot of things you'd like to do. If we knew He was coming back on Thanksgiving Thursday, I doubt that any of us would cook a turkey. We would have more important things to do. I asked a class once what they would do if they knew Jesus was coming back on a certain day, and most of them said they would call their relatives and tell them about the Lord. I wondered why it would take that to make them call.

What is prayer? Prayer is communication with God. He wants to communicate with His creation and He wants us to communicate with Him. He wants us to realize that we are totally dependent upon Him; that the very breath we breathe is from Him. He wants us to ask Him about everything in life. That is what prayer is--dependence upon God for all of life: physical, emotional and spiritual. Life is such an incredible mystery to man. So many things are way outside man's control. So many things happen to ourselves and to people we know, that even if we could show up physically, we still would be unable to do anything to help those who needed help. But prayer to a Living God who cares about us can literally change hearts and events all around us.

The book, "Jesus Teaches on Prayer," by Ray Stedman, is one of the finest books I have read on the subject of prayer. Commenting on Luke 18:1-8, Ray says:

Man ought always to pray and not to faint. We must either be praying or fainting. There is no alternative. The purpose of all faith is to bring us into direct, personal, vital touch with God. True prayer is an awareness of our helpless need and our acknowledgment of divine adequacy. For Jesus, prayer was as necessary as breathing the breath of His life. Although God certainly knows all of our needs, praying for them changes our attitude from complaint to praise, and enables us to participate in God's personal plans for our lives.

Peter himself had to learn how to pray. Perhaps he remembered his own inability to understand the power of prayer as he looked back to the time when he fell asleep in the garden, although Jesus had asked him to pray. Later at the trial of Jesus, he panicked because of fear. At the time he wrote this letter, however, the apostle was speaking from a mature conviction based on many years of experiencing just how powerful a tool prayer is.

When I was young in the Lord, I was so busy doing the Father's business that I didn't seem to have time for prayer. As life has grown more complex, however, I have noticed that my prayer life has changed. I wake up late at night, and I find myself praying for people I'm working with in counseling, for my family, for the church, etc. The Lord has used those times to teach me how to pray. The disciples saw Jesus model prayer for them so many times that they began to ask Him to teach them how to pray. We too should ask the Lord how we should pray. He is faithful and He will do it. He will teach you how to communicate with your Creator in sweet fellowship, so that prayer will not seem a burden--something you are obliged to do--but rather a joy to you. You will find yourself relying on God, not yourself, to change your circumstances, your family or your neighborhood.

What would these early Christians have prayed about as they followed Peter's instructions? Looking back through this letter, a few things stand out. They would have prayed about how to stand up under the various trials they were suffering; how to avoid former lusts; how to walk in holiness; how to purify their hearts to love one another; how to put aside malice, guile, hypocrisy, envy and slander; how to keep their behavior excellent among the Gentiles; how to submit to governmental authority; how as slaves to hold up under unjust suffering; how to maintain a troubled marriage. In other words, they would have learned to pray about every area of their lives.

One of the blessings of the trip the pastoral staff just made to the Far East was the many times of prayer we had together. We also knew that the whole church was praying for us during our time there. In fact, a man came up to me this morning and told me he had been praying for us all the time we were away. So many wonderful things occurred during that trip; it was obvious that God heard those prayers. It was great to watch the unity of the staff as we prayed during the trip. In the airport in Singapore, one of the pastors got a phone call from home, and all of us prayed right there for that man and his family. A couple of nights ago in Hong Kong, as we were having dinner together, Paul Winslow asked all of us to join in prayer to thank the Lord for the many blessings we had experienced. We just stopped what we were doing, and had a time of thanksgiving for all that God had done in our lives during that visit with the Christians of the Far East. We thanked Him for all the seeds that had been planted, and prayed for those who had come to know Him.

So Peter tells the Christians of Asia Minor that as the end of all things was at hand, they should "be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer."

A lifestyle of service

What should be our lifestyle in these last days? First, we should have a lifestyle of prayer; and second,

Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things, God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Here Peter points out the need for Christians to serve one another in three ways until Christ returns. First, "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins." The various trials they were suffering must have caused all kinds of tension and other problems among them; thus Peter asks that they have a "fervent" love for one another. This word suggests earnestness and intensity. Christians are to have a lifestyle of stretching out in love for one another, as a runner stretches forward with all his strength for the tape at the end of a race. This is "agape" love--the self-sacrificing kind of love that costs the giver. The apostle has already talked about this in 1 Peter 1:22: "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart." Echoing these words, Paul writes in Ephesians 4:31-32, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." Jesus Himself said, "This is my commandment; that you love one another, just as I have loved you." Remember that He said this to His disciples after He had been with them for three years. He had to constantly remind them to love one another.

We are all in a process of maturing in Christ, so we should be patient with one another. But we seem to have our hidden agendas, as I call them, for each other. If people fail to perform to our agendas for them, we tend to cut them off and drift away from them. But I have seen the kind of love that Peter is talking about operate right here in our congregation--a love that reaches out to others and covers a multitude of sins. One woman whom I have watched for quite some time in this area is my own wife. She has a friendship with a woman who used to come here, but no longer does, since she has chosen to walk away from the Lord for a season. Through the years, I have noticed that most of us here in the body have walked away from this woman also, but I have noticed that my wife didn't do that. She has continued to hang in with that woman, to love her and admonish her; she has not given up on her. When this woman has troubles, she always calls my wife first--nobody else. She never calls me because she has seen that my attitude toward her shows that I have, in a sense, canceled her. My wife's attitude toward her is a rebuke to me, so that I have asked the Lord why can't I be like that too.

A few days ago, I saw a man whom I had canceled out years ago, come to Dick Patterson's house. I asked Dick, "What are you doing talking to that guy?" "Because I love him," he said. Talk about a rebuke. I have yet another example of this kind of thing. Recently, a brother called me up and asked me about another brother. I gave a nice

report on this man, but my friend detected that my attitude wasn't too good. He told me that I didn't sound too excited about the project he had in mind, and I had to say, "You're right. He's such a mystery." After a pause, this man said, "Aren't we all?" The phone felt like a red-hot coal in my hand. I wondered when I was going to learn to love with the fervent love that Peter talks about here--the love that covers a multitude of sins. Proverbs 10:12 says, "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions." Let us seek to love each other fervently.

The second word Peter gives here is, "Be hospitable to one another without complaint." Christians are to be lovers of strangers. In the ancient world, hospitality was a sacred duty. Strangers were said to be under the protection of Zeus, the god of strangers. The inns of those days were fearful places; so much so that Plato called in keepers--"pirates who held their guests to ransom." Peter recognized the great need for open homes, so that Christians would feel safe and welcome.

Open homes, of course, are a result of open hearts, and the New Testament gives us many examples of such hearts--for instance, the home of Lydia and the home of Gaius. We had many marvelous experiences of such open hearts and open homes on our recent trip. Total strangers opened their homes to us and fed us some wonderful meals. A police chief in Singapore invited me to his home and showed me slides of a mission which he had undertaken to a nearby island. That is the kind of thing Peter is suggesting here: "Be hospitable to one another...." I've noticed that trait among many people here in this body--people whose homes are always open and available to house and shelter strangers. Hebrews 12:2 tells us, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by it, some have entertained angels unawares." A couple of years ago, a man knocked on my door one rainy night and said to me, "A friend of mine in Texas told me that if I was ever in Half Moon Bay, to knock on your door and I would have a place to stay!" I invited him in and made hot chocolate for him and he spent the night. When I got up in the morning, he was gone, and I thought of the verse in Hebrews that I just quoted.

But notice that Peter says we should be hospitable "without complaint." Strangers act differently than we do, don't they? That's a given. We must realize that when we tell people, "Make yourself at home," that's exactly what they'll do--they'll make themselves at home in our home, the same way they make themselves at home in their homes, because they think they're at home! We can't expect people not to eat anything, not to use our cars or our TVs. I told one of my cousins he could stay in my home once while we were away, and when I got home I found him lying in my waterbed, eating food and watching TV! That's not what I had in mind! I thought he'd wait in the garage until I got home!

Thirdly, Peter says, use your spiritual gifts: "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another...." If we take the New Testament passages on spiritual gifts, Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Corinthians 12, we discover that there are 19 spiritual gifts, and they break down into two different categories: the speaking gifts and the working gifts.

Let us look at seven different marks which Peter gives in this section regarding the spiritual gifts. First, "each one," i.e., everyone has a spiritual gift; two, "has received," i.e., each person has already received a gift once he or she came to know Jesus Christ; three, it's a "gift," i.e., you don't have to work for this gift which ministers to the spirit; four, "employ it," i.e., it was designed by God to be used; in fact, you should build your life around your spiritual gift; five, "serving one another," i.e., not fording it over one another; your gift is to be directed toward the body; six, "as good stewards," that is, it is not yours, but has been given to you to use; seven, "of the manifold grace of God,"--a spiritual gift is a many-colored aspect of the grace of God, and as such, it's not something we deserve. By using our spiritual gifts, we demonstrate love for one another, so it's important that we know what our gifts are and where we fit in the body of Christ.

Peter then goes on to talk about the speaking gifts: "Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the oracles of God." The Greek and Roman mystery religions held that the words of their gods came through their priests. But the Christian oracles were the apostles and prophets who introduced their teaching with the words, "Thus says the Lord...." For instance, in 1 Corinthians 11:23, the apostle Paul declares, "For I have received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you...."

Then, referring to the serving gifts, Peter says, "...whoever serves, let him do so by the strength which God supplies." Depend upon the Holy Spirit for the power to do this. As Paul wrote, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

To what end? "So that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." The aim of all our service, our preaching and teaching is that God may be glorified in Christ. Preaching is not to be done to display the preacher, but to bring men and women face to face with Christ. Serving is done not to bring prestige to the server, but to turn people's thoughts toward God.

What should be our lifestyle in these last days? According to Peter, we are to have a lifestyle of prayer and of service; we are to love one another, to open our homes, and to use our spiritual gifts so that God will be glorified in Christ. And we are to depend on God to accomplish this in our lives. Let us look to him for the power, the courage, the wisdom and the forgiving spirit to put into practice what the apostle brings before us in this letter.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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