

### *Eyes on the Prize*

Since you call upon a Father who judges all people according to their actions without favoritism, you should conduct yourselves with reverence during the time of your dwelling in a strange land. Live in this way, knowing that you were not liberated by perishable things like silver or gold from the empty lifestyle you inherited from your ancestors. Instead, you were liberated by the precious blood of Christ, like that of a flawless, spotless lamb. Christ was chosen before the creation of the world, but was only revealed at the end of time. This was done for you, who through Christ are faithful to the God who raised him from the dead and gave him glory. So now, your faith and hope should rest in God.

As you set yourselves apart by your obedience to the truth so that you might have genuine affection for your fellow believers, love each other deeply and earnestly. Do this because you have been given new birth—not from the type of seed that decays but from seed that doesn't. This seed is God's life-giving and enduring word. Thus,

*All human life on the earth is like grass,  
and all human glory is like a flower in a field.  
The grass dries up and its flower falls off,  
but the Lord's word endures forever.*

This is the word that was proclaimed to you as good news.

1 Pet. 1:17-25 (C.E.B.)

One of the modern inventions we all use without much thought is the refrigerator. We keep fruits and vegetables there. We keep our milk there. We keep our leftovers there. It amazes me the amount and the variety of stuff we put there!

But the freezer compartment is really the most interesting place to look.

I looked through ours the other day. There were the things you'd expect like ice cubes and frozen meats. But I also found some of last year's strawberries and some chunks of apple – I think – they were heavily crusted in frost so it was hard to tell. And when I looked in our larger freezer, I found some odd cuts of meat that we'd bought on sale, a family size lasagna we keep in case company comes unexpectedly, some salmon from my fishing trip two years ago, and a few loaves of bread. I also found frozen snack food we bought when we were expecting grandkids to come and visit last summer.

I realized there are times when we put things in our large freezer thinking they'll keep forever. But they don't. Especially when there is a power outage. Or, as happened to us a few years ago, the freezer gets inadvertently unplugged!

That day we learned what it means to have perishables in the house. Things that hadn't been used in time had to be thrown away.

Some things are like that. Perishable. Temporary.

As I said last week, I'll be preaching from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter throughout the season of Easter. There are some scholars who believe the letter was originally a sermon celebrating baptism.<sup>1</sup> When I read the letter with that in mind, I can imagine newly converted Christians hearing an exhortation to live differently because of what God has done for them, to live differently because they are part of a new creation.

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, p. 262

Whether this epistle began as a sermon or not, the book includes a healthy dose of basic reminders about how to live out our faith in response to Easter. It's easy to see why the Lectionary Committee suggests it for reading in the season of Easter.

Today's text reminds us to focus on things that endure, that stand the test of time, the things that are everlasting – not like things we put in our ice box. Peter reminds us to keep our focus there, rather than on the more immediate concerns of daily life – even as we face the concerns of daily living.

Let's pray.

*O God, you are the One who is, who was, and who will come again.*

*You alone are eternal. Your word, alone, is everlasting.*

*And yet, we just sang a song promising to praise you forever:*

*“Christ, we do all adore thee, and we do praise thee forever.”*

*We come before you humbly acknowledging our mortality,  
even as we aspire to participate in your eternal realm.*

*Help us hear your voice in our midst today – in the here and now – as we try to imagine what it  
means to experience your everlasting love.*

*Teach us today to look beyond the temporary things  
as we pledge to respond to your eternal love –  
so that our aspirations may become fulfilled in you.*

*Amen.*

Peter quotes from Isaiah as he reminds us that “all human life .. is like grass” (Is. 40:6; 1 Pet. 1:24). It all withers away and dies. (I know that's not exactly a *feel good* image, but it's what Peter says!) The truth is everything we see is perishable. It's all transitory. Peter draws our attention instead to things that last, inviting us to keep our eyes on “God's life-giving and enduring word” (1 Pet. 1:23).

I know we'd like to think some of our things will last forever – and not just food in our freezer. There are people who inherit and hope to pass on family heirlooms, for example. They hope these objects will connect our future families with the past of our ancestors. But they won't do that forever. Some of us make use of things longer than others, but in the end, like the things we find in our refrigerators at home, everything has a shelf life beyond which it is of no use.

Sometimes that shelf life is measured in days and weeks, sometimes it's measured in months and years. There are even some things whose shelf life is measured in decades and centuries. But it all comes to an end. Even silver and gold, Peter says (1 Pet. 1:18). Even these, the most treasured of metals, will all pass away.

I used to be an avid coin collector. Then I became someone who had some coins I collected – and if you don't already know, there is a difference.

When I was a coin collector, I could tell you how much silver wears off a dime in a year of circulation. It can't always be seen, but it can be measured. Over time, the faces on coins become flat and obscure. Where that silver goes, I can't explain, but it goes away. That's because even coins are perishable.

Our problem is that we keep trying to accumulate things that are temporary. We spend our energies accumulating “things.” Things like coins, or houses, or shares of stock, or cars, or land. And we forget how perishable those things are.

Even those people who claim not to be accumulating things find themselves focusing on the temporary. Rather than accumulate things, for example, people try to set sporting records or set a goal to become known worldwide as an expert in a particular field. And we forget that all this is temporary, too.

I remember reading a line in the comics once. It featured a weather forecaster who was giving a long-range forecast. He said, “the sun will fade and life on earth will cease to exist.” That is definitely a long-range forecast! But it highlights the truth that even the most permanent things in our lives – the sun and the earth – are temporary, whether we want to believe it or not.

Now, make sure you hear me. I believe we need to be good stewards of these gifts, no matter how temporary they may be. Which is why I found myself tending to our trees and yard yesterday. But as happy as I am that we celebrate Earth Day every year, I also know that the energy being spent on Earth Day is energy spent on our temporary, transitory, and perishable home. We need to take care of the earth, but we also we need to acknowledge that it is not eternal.

There is only one thing that is permanent – and it’s not death. (Thank you, Jesus.) Nor is it taxes. There is only one thing that is imperishable. And that one thing is God. God, who was and who is and who ever will be.

This God, this eternal and everlasting part of our lives, who will serve as both judge and jury, invites us to participate in the eternal things of life. Peter reminds us God redeems us so we can experience everlasting life (1 Pet. 1:21). God invites us to a renewed life full of hope and promise. God invites us to focus on the imperishable, on the permanent, on the eternal.

And that, says Peter, is what is so remarkable about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. He revealed to us the eternal and immortal nature of God and at the same time, Jesus invites us to participate and experience it ourselves.

Yet we continue to seek the eternal, the permanent, the immortal by pursuing temporary and transitory things and ideas. We know we can’t attain it this way, but we still strive for it. This is what Peter calls the “empty lifestyle [we] inherited from [our] ancestors” (1 Pet. 1:18). It’s the only way we know. We learned it from our parents and their parents before them. We learn it from each other. And while we know it’s futile, we still seek the eternal through the perishable.

There were two women who were very close friends. One of them owned a very expensive pearl necklace. She let her friend borrow it once, and while no one can ever explain how these things happen, her friend lost the string of pearls.

The woman who lost the pearls borrowed money to buy a new necklace for her friend without telling her what had happened. For several years, she took extra jobs and worked as much overtime as possible to pay off those loans.

In a conversation some years later, the woman who owned the pearls made a comment about them. In the discussion that followed she admitted that the real pearls are kept in a safe; the ones she had let her friend borrow were fake – not realizing she now owns two sets of real pearls.

The woman worked hard for no reason.

Too often, I think we respond to God’s grace the same way.

We think, for instance, that by coming to church every week we can gain God’s favor. Or we think that by giving of our time or our talents or our financial resources that God will look kindly upon us. In our best

moments, we recognize the fallacy of our actions, but we often insist on trying to find a way to give back to God anyway, as if we can ever repay the debt of God's love.

The truth is that only by the grace of God are we even allowed into God's presence, that only because of the priceless gift of God's Son are we made right with God (1 Pet. 1:20-21). It's not our doing.

Our response is two-fold, then.

First, we acknowledge the source of our eternal salvation. It comes from the one eternal and everlasting factor in our lives, the grace and love of God. We accept this gift in humility and thanksgiving. We gather in worship, not so we can become right with God, but out of gratitude that God has provided reconciliation. We give, not so we can earn God's favor, but with thanksgiving for the things God has already given to us.

The other thing we do in response to God's love is to love one another, to treat one another as the sacred image of God.

The story has been told of a man in England in the early 1700s. He had been out of work and living in the streets when he took ill. Two doctors came upon the man and spoke to one another in Latin, thinking he was uneducated and wouldn't understand them. They were in agreement about their opinion: he was a vile man whose body could become the subject of their own experimentation.

They intended to do some exploratory surgery on him, just to see how his body worked. They had no intention of making him well; they simply planned to use his body as a tool for their own education. He was a vile man, after all. Imagine their surprise when this man responded in fluent Latin, "do you call vile a man for whom Christ died?"

They had forgotten to see him as a person first, a person created in the image of God. They forgot that God sees every person as a child. God sees every person as having worth and value.

Through Christ, Peter says, the seed has been planted to allow us to see as God sees (1 Pet. 1:23). Our response is to love one another. Not in words alone, but also in deeds. We do this ..

- By sitting with a stranger in church.
- By holding the hand of a child who is lost.
- By walking with a lonely widow.
- By listening to the heartaches of a teenager.

We are to have genuine affection and "love each other deeply and earnestly," says Peter (1 Pet. 1:22).

Loving from the heart is a process of looking past the current circumstances and settings, it's an attempt on our part to see the person as God sees them. God, who sees us from the perspective of eternity, looks at us with a sense of hope for transformation and repentance. God sees beyond our current crisis to the ultimate perfection of our lives by faith and grace.

Last summer, we took our grandson on a Merry-go-Round. You could see the fear in his eyes as he clung to the moving horse. I was able to coax him to try and catch the gold ring as we made the circle. Keeping his eyes out for that prize allowed him to find enjoyment in the ride that had seemed scary.

Peter invites us to keep our eyes on the prize of living life differently because of what God has done, to "conduct ourselves with reverence" (1 Pet. 1:17).

To those recently baptized converts, I'm sure it seemed scary to change the way they lived – especially in times of persecution and oppression. By keeping their eyes on the prize, however, they could live in new ways without fear.

If we learn to look at the eternal, rather than the temporary, we will realize that in Christ, we have been made pure. We are purified to live life differently, to love one another effectively, and to care for one another intimately.

Our hymn of response today is one I don't know. But I'm so glad the music team suggested it for us today.<sup>2</sup>

“Renew your church, .. Teach us to pray, .. Teach us to love.”

“O let our hearts with love be stirred .. O send us forth with power endued.”

We experience the eternal in our midst in and through Christ who is God's “life-giving and enduring word” (1 Pet. 1:23). That is the prize to keep our eyes on.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *Renew Your Church, Voices Together* (MennoMedia, 2020), # 717