

## INTRODUCTION

Do you think you've reached the half-way point in your life? If you're a teenager, you may think most of your life is still ahead of you—it could be. But we all know teenagers die. If you're 50 or older you may think you've passed the half-way point—but we know people are living longer than ever before.

When Christian comedian Dennis Swanberg was here a couple of weeks ago, he was joking with some of us before the service. He said, "I'm glad to be back here at Green Acres. Last time I spoke here, a 93-year-old woman surrendered her life for missions. But her mother wouldn't let her go!"

We all know age is a relative thing. One lady said her five-year-old granddaughter asked her, "Grandma, were you on the ark with Noah?" She said, "Of course not!" Her grand daughter replied, "Well, why didn't you drown?" When you're five, eighteen sounds old. When you're eighteen, forty sounds old. When you're forty, seventy sounds old. When you're seventy, ninety sounds old. When you're ninety nothing sounds old!

We tend to divide life into different stages. In his play, "As You Like It" William Shakespeare claimed there are seven stages of life. His character Jacques observes: "All the world's a stage And all the men and women merely players, They have their exits and entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts, His acts being seven ages. At first the infant, Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms. Then, the whining schoolboy with his satchel And shining morning face, creeping like snail Unwillingly to school. And then the lover, Sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad..." He goes on to say stage four is a soldier, stage five is a judge, and stage six is old age, then he concludes: "Last scene of all, That ends this strange eventful history, Is second childishness and mere oblivion, Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." Sounds pretty cynical, huh?

Actually, I think the ancients understood the stages of life better than Shakespeare did and certainly better than we do. The Aberdeen Bestiary is a collection of writings from North England dating back to the 1200s. These allegorical stories about animals are purported to have come from an ancient Greek writer named Physiologus. In addition to the dozens of articles about animals there is a fascinating section which describes the six stages of a person's life. I like these age divisions better than the ones we use today. The Aberdeen Bestiary says stage one is: (1) Infancy—birth to age 7; (2) Childhood—8-14. No surprise so far, but they considered (3) Adolescence to cover the ages of 14 all the way to age 28. That's why some of you young adults are still having problems: you are still in your adolescence! (4) Youth was considered to be the ages of 29 to 50! The next stage was called (5) Maturity, which covered the ages 51 to 69. Then (6) Old age started at 70 and was called the riper years when a person enjoys the fruits of their labor.

Whether you're tiny or ninety the Bible says we should live the rest of our lives in a certain way. In I Peter 4:1, we read:

"Arm yourselves with the same attitude because he who has suffered in his body is done

with sin. As a result he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires but rather for the will of God...”

Then beginning in verse 7 we discover *how* we can live our lives according to God’s will:

“The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”

There are three important directives we must understand and obey. They are prayer, love, and service. If you will follow God’s directions in those three areas, the rest of your life really *can* be the best of your life!

## **1. PRAY WITH A SENSE OF URGENCY!**

Verse 7 says: “The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.”

Have you ever been watching a football team when the two-minute warning sounded? They go into a totally different mode. They call plays from the line of scrimmage. They hustle back to the line of scrimmage and call plays without a huddle. They perform at a higher level. That’s what we should be doing right now. Peter says the end is near—so let’s start praying as if the two-minute warning has just sounded.

When you read the letters written by Paul and Peter in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, it’s clear they believed the return of Jesus would be in their lifetime and it would be followed with the end of the world as we know it. It’s been 2,000 years and Jesus still hasn’t returned. Were they wrong? Not really. That’s the way Jesus told us to live.

In Mark 13 He was speaking about the time of His return and said, “The exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven’s angels, not even the Son. Only the Father. So keep a sharp lookout, for you don’t know the timetable. It’s like a man who takes a trip, leaving home and putting his servants in charge, each assigned a task, and commanding the gatekeeper to stand watch. So stay at your post, watching. You have no idea when the homeowner is returning. You don’t want him showing up unannounced, with you asleep on the job.” (Mark 13:33-36, *The Message*)

Our job is to work, preach, and pray with a sense of urgency. Jesus himself said on the last page of the Bible, “Behold, I come quickly!” (Revelation 21: 7)

I remember hearing a funny story about a young preacher who was delivering his first message in a little country church. He was preaching on that verse from Revelation and he said, “Behold,

I come quickly!" He was nervous, and forgot what he was to say next, so he backed up ran forward and repeated that statement, "Behold I come quickly!" He still couldn't remember what to say next, so he backed up and tried it again. As he moved forward, he shouted with great intensity, "Behold I come quickly!" At that point he tripped over a microphone stand and did a flip right off the stage and landed in a man's lap on the front pew. The young preacher was embarrassed and said to the man, "Sir, I'm so sorry!" The man said, "Don't worry, you warned me three times you were coming!"

When you face an urgent situation, the first thing you should do is pray. When Jesus was facing the cross, He went into a garden and prayed. He told His disciples to watch and pray. The great missionary to China, Hudson Taylor wrote: "I have seen many men work without praying, though I have never seen any good come out of it; but I have never seen a man pray without working."

Since the return of Jesus is closer than ever, we must pray with a sense of urgency. We don't have unlimited time to tell people about Jesus. Millions are dying every day without Christ, and when He does return we will lose the opportunity to spread the good news. We need to pray for God to send forth laborers into the harvest; pray that God will save people who don't know Him; pray for boldness so we can share the gospel across the street and across the globe.

## **2. LOVE WITH A SHOW OF HOSPITALITY!**

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

Love is the most important command we can follow. Jesus said all of the commandments in the Old Testament could be summarized in only two: (1) Love God with all your being; and (2) Love your neighbor as yourself.

Peter gives us two important qualities of love in this passage:

### **(1) Love covers sin**

He writes, "love covers a multitude of sins." This doesn't mean when I love, it covers up my sins—it means the best kind of love covers the sins of the person we are loving. Proverbs 10:12 says, "Love covers all wrongs." The language in Proverbs 10 and I Peter 4 of "covering sin" is a reference to something that happened back in Genesis 9. You've probably heard the story of Noah and the Ark. Noah was a righteous man who obeyed God when God told him to build a large boat because a worldwide flood was coming. Because of his faith and obedience Noah and his family were saved through the flood. But do you know what happened to Noah *after* the flood? You don't get this part of the story in Sunday School, but it's in the Bible. It's a reminder that nobody is perfect except Jesus. Noah planted a vineyard, grew grapes, and got into the wine making business. He sampled his own wine and got so drunk that he took off all his clothes. His grown sons could have laughed at him or put him to shame, but because they loved him, they covered his nakedness. Two of them slipped into the room with a cloak. They walked backwards so they wouldn't see his nakedness, and they placed the cloak over him to cover him. Why? Because they loved him. And that's what the Bible means when it says in I Corinthians 13:5 that

“love keeps no record of wrongs.” Get rid of your list. Is there somebody you know who needs your love? When you love them, like Noah’s boys, you cover a multitude of sins.

In the 1978 Gator Bowl, Ohio State coach Woody Hayes lost his temper and slugged a Clemson player on national television. He was fired that same night. He was facing shame and disgrace from every part of the football world. A few weeks after that, there was a huge banquet where Dallas Cowboys head coach Tom Landry was speaking. Many professional and college football players and coaches were there. Tom Landry asked if he could bring a personal guest—and his guest was Woody Hayes. He was covering a multitude of sins by showing love to the coach who had failed. Who do you know that may need that kind of covering love?

We all need it, frankly. God looks at us and sees all the filth and dirt of our sin, and yet He says, “I’ve got you covered.” Because “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

## **(2) Love cares for strangers**

Peter points out in verse 9 that one of the most visible expressions of love is hospitality. Entertaining guests in your home is not the same thing as hospitality—don’t confuse the two. Entertaining involves having your good friends in your home—people you know you’ll enjoy. Hospitality is inviting strangers into your home—without knowing much about them. Entertaining is a social grace that will get your name in the paper. Hospitality is an expression of love that never seeks any recognition. In entertaining the focus is on the host or and their beautiful home or cooking skill—in hospitality the focus is on the needs of the guest.

Hospitality goes against our self-centered nature. It’s easy to neglect hospitality because we feel much more comfortable hiding out with our own families in our castles. Our self-centeredness is like gravity. Gravity is a powerful force that pulls everything toward the center of the planet. It’s not all bad, because gravity is what keeps me glued to the ground. It’s what keeps all of us from flying off into space. Like gravity, our selfish nature causes us to want to withdraw within ourselves—within our homes, within our rooms. It’s not all bad, because it is our sense of self that causes us to want to protect ourselves from danger.

Whenever you fly in an airplane, you defy gravity. It requires the effort of thrust and the lift of the wings, but gravity is overcome. Hospitality is like flying—it takes effort, but when we express hospitality to strangers, we are overcoming the law of selfishness. It isn’t natural, and it isn’t easy. That’s why Peter says to “show hospitality without grumbling.”

Have you broken free from the surly bonds of self-centeredness and discovered the exhilaration of soaring love expressed as hospitality? Consider: Who are the people you’ve had as guests in your home over the past six months? Same old same old? Same friends? Same family? That’s not hospitality. One of the best ways to show the love of Jesus is to make friends with strangers by showing them hospitality.

In the Genesis 18, Abraham demonstrated hospitality. Three strangers approached his property—they were angels, but they looked like ordinary men—Abraham didn’t realize who they were until later. He welcomed them, washed their feet, and fed them. What a lesson! If you never open your

home to strangers, you may miss one of the greatest opportunities on earth—meet angels. The Bible says in Hebrews 13:2: "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it." (Hebrews 13:2 NIV)

If you want the rest of your life to be the best of your life, try ramping up your hospitality. Start looking for opportunities to have strangers in your home. Give them a bed, give them a meal, and give them the love of Jesus.

### **3. SERVE WITH A SPIRIT OF AUTHORITY!**

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. You were not saved to sit, you were saved to serve! And God has given you at least one spiritual gift to serve. This spiritual gift is a special ability God has given you to serve Him by serving others. It's not a natural ability, it's a supernatural ability. You won't enjoy the rest of your life very much unless you find out what your gifts are and start using them in the church. Too many Christians are sitting in the pews using one excuse or another.

In his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren writes: "If you're not involved in any service or ministry, what excuse have you been using? Abraham was old, Jacob was insecure... Joseph was abused, Moses stuttered, Samson was co-dependent, Rahab was immoral, David had an affair and all kinds of family problems, Elijah was suicidal, Jeremiah was depressed, Jonah was reluctant, Naomi was a widow... Peter was impulsive and hot-tempered, Martha worried a lot... Thomas had doubts, Paul had poor health, and Timothy was timid. That is quite a variety of misfits, but God used each of them in his service. He will use you, too, if you stop making excuses." Depending on how you count, there are 14 to 18 different spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament. The most important thing we discover in I Peter 4 is that spiritual gifts generally fall into two broad categories: (1) Speaking gifts and (2) Service gifts. Some of you have the ability to teach, or preach, or use your words to encourage others. Others of you feel inadequate because you don't feel comfortable speaking—no problem, you may have an ability to change diapers in the nursery, or visit the hospital, or set up chairs and tables—that a gift, too.

#### **Employ God's authority!**

Whatever your gift, you need to employ it with God's authority. If your gift is teaching or preaching, Peter says: Deliver God's message. The Old Testament prophets spoke with God's authority when they said, "Thus saith the Lord!" We do the same thing today when we say, "The Bible says..." Because this book is the inspired Word of God, I'm not delivering my message today—it's God's message. When the Holy Spirit is energizing a speaker and a listener this is what happens: the words I speak leave my mouth and travel to your ears, but when you hear the words, they have been transformed into the very Word of God. That's why Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

#### **Depend on God's strength!**

If your gift is serving, here's your strategy: Depend on God's strength. Serving the Lord can be

physically draining, and if you try to do it in your own strength you will fail. But God’s strength is available.

The great Bible teacher, Donald Grey Barnhouse, wrote about an American citizen who was once arrested in the midst of a Latin-American revolution. He was sentenced to stand in front of a firing squad simply for being an American. The American ambassador was so outraged, he wrapped an American flag around his body and stood between the arrested citizen and the firing squad. He said, “If you shoot this man, you will have to shoot through this flag. If you shoot this flag you will incur the wrath of the entire American nation.” It worked and the citizen was released. In the same way, we are Ambassadors for Christ, and we are wrapped in His righteousness. So, wherever you serve—whether it’s in the nursery, or on a foreign mission field, remember you have the authority of heaven itself!

## CONCLUSION

One of my heroes of the faith was Hudson Taylor. In 1849, he was a bored seventeen-year-old. Raised in a wealthy Christian home, he really had no real interest in the Bible or spiritual matters. He was extremely shy and spent much of his time reading. One day he was so bored he read a Christian booklet that referred to the millions of people in China who had never heard about Jesus. That day God broke his heart and from that moment, his passion was to share the love of God with the Chinese people. At age 21 he traveled to China and began trying to spread the gospel, but his first years were frustrating because few people responded to his message.

One day a wise Chinese man pointed out that Hudson’s English suit had extra buttons on the sleeves and backs, but there were no button holes—and he asked why. Hudson Taylor realized his English-style dress was distracting his listeners. From that point he was determined to learn to speak Mandarin and dress in the Chinese custom. He discovered God didn’t want the Chinese to become like English Christians, but to become Chinese Christians.

He later returned to England where he translated the New Testament into Chinese, and convinced others to join him in China. He returned with several other missionaries, and married one of them. Hudson Taylor faced many hardships including the death of his wife and child, but God gave him the strength to maintain his work.

In one city, a middle-aged man was one of the leading officers of a reformed Buddhist group. He had long sought the truth by studying Buddhism, Taoism, and the writings of Confucius. When Hudson Taylor shared the good news of Jesus with him, this man found the peace and truth for which he had been searching. He became a Christian and started preaching to his fellow Chinese.

Shortly after his conversion, he asked Hudson Taylor how long the message of Jesus had been known in England. When he was told that it had been known for hundreds of years the man was shocked. He said, “What? For hundreds of years you have had these glad tidings and only now have come to teach it to us? My father sought after the truth for more than twenty years, and died without finding it. Oh, why did you not come sooner?”

Hudson Taylor was small in stature, and weak physically, but because he trusted God. Today, he

is considered a spiritual giant. He devoted fifty years of his life to sharing the love of God with the Chinese. As a result of his work, when he died in 1905, there were 250 mission stations and over 100,000 new Chinese Christians.

The secret of Hudson Taylor's effectiveness was that he learned to depend upon God's strength instead of his own. If you want to experience true fulfillment in this life, you must learn this secret Hudson Taylor discovered.

He wrote: "I myself, for instance, am not especially gifted, and am shy by nature, but my gracious and merciful God and Father inclined Himself to me, and when I was weak in faith He strengthened me while I was still young. He taught me in my helplessness to rest on Him, and to pray even about little things in which another might have felt able to help himself."

He said that through his life, he went through three stages of understanding the secret of God's strength: "I used to ask God if He would come and help me...and then I asked God if I might come and help Him...and then I ended by asking God to do His work through me."

Have you made that discovery? If you do, the rest of your life can be the best of your life. Here's how: Pray like never before, because God's clock is winding down. Show love to others so deeply that you welcome strangers into your life. Give your life away to others—but do it in God's strength.

## OUTLINE

### 1. PRAY WITH A SENSE OF URGENCY!

"The exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven's angels, not even the Son. Only the Father. So keep a sharp lookout, for you don't know the timetable. It's like a man who takes a trip, leaving home and putting his servants in charge, each assigned a task, and commanding the gatekeeper to stand watch. So stay at your post, watching. You have no idea when the homeowner is returning. You don't want him showing up unannounced, with you asleep on the job." (Mark 13:33-36, *The Message*)

### 2. LOVE WITH A SHOW OF HOSPITALITY!

"Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it." Hebrews 13:2

- (1) Love covers sin
- (2) Love cares for strangers

### 3. SERVE WITH A SPIRIT OF AUTHORITY!

Speaking gifts: Employ God's authority!  
Service gifts: Depend on God's strength!



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes