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Title: #beCHURCH: Be Helpful

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Text: [1 Peter 4:8-11](#)

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Today is the third sermon in a series of four about how we can be our best and BE CHURCH. The first in the series was about worship. In my sermon at the Mud Creek Campus that day, I said that worship should have an UPWARD focus in praise of God, an INWARD focus in prayer and reflection, and an OUTWARD focus as we go into the

community to serve. Last week was the importance of connecting with one another so that we coalesce as a unified team as we serve. Do you see the common word in both of those? SERVE. That's where we find ourselves today as we explore how to best BE CHURCH – being helpful – serving.

Show of hands – raise your hand if you've been fortunate enough to visit an In-N-Out Burger? When our youngest son, Matt, graduated from high school three years ago, we asked where he'd like to go on a trip. San Francisco was his reply. While most people would delight in seeing the Golden Gate Bridge or going to Alcatraz or Fisherman's Wharf (and we did all of those), it seems the highlight of Matt's trip was our lunch at In-N-Out Burger.

If you've not experienced it, In-N-Out has a very limited menu consisting of only three different burgers: the hamburger, cheeseburger, and "Double-Double" which is double meat and double cheese. The hamburgers come with lettuce, tomato, with or without onions, and a sauce, which is called "spread," and is similar to Thousand Island dressing with a mayonnaise base. French fries and fountain drinks are available, as well as three flavors of milkshakes. The menu is so simple. There are no frills, no glitz, and no glam, no chicken, no fish. In-N-Out Burger just specializes in a simple burger that is done right.

In-N-Out Burger discovered that, for them, one of the keys to a successful restaurant was simplicity. If we follow our scripture for this morning, the key to our effort to effectively BE CHURCH is quite simple as well. Like In-N-Out Burger, when we do just a few simple things well, we can attain excellence. In 1 Peter 4:8–11, the author uses the nearness of Christ's return as a

motivation for simple, but excellent living. It starts in verse 7, where it says that we should “pray with a sense of urgency” – always good counsel and a foundation for all we do as Christians.

After that, we are to love one another always. To BE CHURCH, we ought to love with all that is within us. The eighth and ninth verses of the fourth chapter say, “Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining.” (1 Peter 4:8-9). The fact that the author of 1 Peter had to write down that last part – be hospitable to one another without complaining – tells me there were issues with those who would read this letter. Usually, something gets written down in a list of instructions only because it’s happened.

It’s like the microwave oven manual that says “do not use for drying pets,” or the toilet cleaning brush with instructions that says, “do not use orally,” or the push lawn mower that has a line in the manual that says, “not to be used as a hedge trimmer.”¹ You know that those things have happened and thus the instruction. The same is true in 1 Peter. When it says, “Be hospitable to one another without complaining,” you can be pretty sure that they were complaining and weren't being hospitable to one another.

First Peter is a letter addressed to exiles scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. The five areas listed in the first verse of the 1 Peter were Roman provinces in Asia Minor. The order in which the provinces are listed may reflect the route that would have been taken by the messenger who delivered the circular letter. While the new Christians have encountered oppression and hostility from locals, the writer advises them to maintain loyalty both to their religion and the Roman Empire.²

In talking about loving with a sense of urgency as step one of a simple two-step process to be the church, the author uses the words, “above all” to prioritize this action as the most important. The reason that Peter stresses love is because it is the most essential Christian characteristic. Jesus said it best: “I give to you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34–35).

Knowing how difficult the love commandment can be, 1 Peter urges us to “keep fervent” or “be constant” in our love for one another. The word “fervent” is the Greek adjective *ektene*, which means “stretched” or “strained.” The Greeks originally used this word to describe the way a horse stretched to reach its top speed or the way the taut muscles of an athlete

strains to win a race. It brings to mind a high jump athlete stretching out to clear the bar or a runner in baseball sliding head-first into a base.

The only other time that the adjective "*ektenes*" is used is Luke 22:44 when Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane and he was praying fervently.³ On this occasion, Luke writes, "His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground." The point in using the word here is that biblical love is more sweat than sweet. It involves effort! To love some of our brothers and sisters requires great effort and diligence. Love takes sustained, strenuous effort and it's so easy to use busyness, grievances, and shyness for excuses why we don't love others. They are just that – excuses.

So, it's critical to pray with a sense of urgency and love constantly, but the other thing on our simple In-N-Out Christian characteristics menu to BE CHURCH is to serve others. "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:10–11).

These exiles, and by extension, us, are to serve God and to give God glory in all that we do. There is praise and excitement in the conclusion of this section. The greatness and glory of God ought to have this same profound, awe-inspiring impact on us. This little snippet of scripture also gives us insights into the nature and use of spiritual gifts.

Spiritual gifts are God-given abilities for ministry. The word "gift" is charisma, literally "grace gift." Grace is unmerited, and so we cannot boast in the gifts we have been given. The gift is undeserved and unsought, provided exclusively by God. When someone gives you a gift, they expect you to use the gift. Shortly after we moved to Indianapolis some 15 years ago, my wife, Ruth, thought that I would like to restart my golf game that had been dormant for some time. She gave me a gift certificate to use for lessons at Grey Eagle just down the road.

I put that certificate in my desk drawer, and for a few weeks when I was getting stuff out of that drawer, I would see that certificate and think how nice it was to want to do that for me. But after about a year of not using it, I began to feel some guilt that I hadn't used it. I eventually moved it to another drawer where I wouldn't see it as much.

It is the same with any gift that a person may give you. They want you to open it and use it. If they give you golf clubs, they want you to take them

out and use them. If they give you a fishing pole, they want you to take it out and fish. If they give you a grill, they want you to cook on it. If they give you a camera, they want you to take pictures with it. If they give you clothes, they want you to wear them. Even a decoration is not meant to just sit in a box; it is meant to be taken out and used to decorate a space. People don't give you a gift to sit in a box; they give it to you to use it.

God is the same way. God has not given you a spiritual gift so that you can put it in the desk drawer and when that's too in your face, move it to another desk drawer. Your spiritual gift is to be used in a specific place of service in the church. Employ it! Use it in some specific way in the church.

There is, however, one difference between the gifts people give us and the spiritual gifts God gives us. If someone gives you a gift, and you don't use it, it just hurts you – if I don't play that golf, it hurts me (well, and my golf game). If you don't wear those clothes or use that grill, it's just you who are poorer for it. But in 1 Peter, the spiritual gift God has given you is not just for you but for the service for others and God's glory. The gifts we have are for others and if we don't use them, it is others who are poorer for it and it is God who has not been glorified.

That happens both inside and outside the walls of the church. While this church and all churches have staff, it mostly depends on volunteers to make the ministry happen. Inside the church, there are children to be led and loved on, there are opportunities in technology that make worship happen, there are greeters and people who care for the building and grounds. The pandemic has made everyone do a reset and now we are rebuilding teams to serve inside the church.

Serving beyond the walls of the church is the same. It's been reset because of the pandemic and every outreach team is being rebuilt from scratch. There are lots of places where we can be of service in the community and the world. Some are already in place and some are dreams in your head. When I was a consultant for our denomination, I once visited a congregation in Wichita, Kansas to help them envision new programs. I interviewed several people throughout a Saturday.

I distinctly remember one woman who talked to me about her dreams for a ministry in the church. She was a recently retired teacher and wanted to partner with the elementary school across from the church to develop a tutoring program. She was willing to set it up, lead it and recruit volunteers. She said that she had floated the idea but that it had died in a sub-committee of the Education Committee that it would have to pass through before going to the Board of the church. She was dispirited by the

bureaucracy that killed, or at least stalled, her idea. I don't want to be that church. If you have an idea that fits for ministry and you are willing to lead it, let's talk.

I want Geist Christian Church to be thought of as a mission station that renews and energizes followers of Jesus Christ to serve the world. If you don't use the gift God has given you in service, then things do not get done in the church. You are not just hurting yourself when you don't use your spiritual gift. You are hurting others who are not being ministered to and you are not giving God the glory that should come to God from the use of your gift.

So, God says, use the gift I gave you - employ it in serving one another. You do that by finding a specific place where you can put your gift to work. A lot of times, you find the place that you will best serve God by "trial & error." Try a certain thing; see if God blesses and uses that. If God does, you have found your place of service. If it does not go well, or you feel that this was just not the thing God has gifted you for, then don't give up; try something else, and keep on doing that until you have found the ministry God has gifted to you.

Spiritual gifts are given for our stewardship. We are called to use our gifts as "good stewards of the manifold grace of God," 1 Peter says. In biblical times, a "steward" really had nothing of his own. They may have managed the entire estate of his master, but the riches at their disposal were not their own. The success of the steward was measured in how well he managed those riches. We are stewards in the church. Our gifts are from God and we are called to strive to use those gifts in service to others.

In 1 Peter, the menu for Christian discipleship – the menu to BE CHURCH – is even simpler than In-N-Out Burger. There are three items – you'll want all three – we need all three to BE CHURCH. PRAY with urgency. Maintain constant LOVE for one another. SERVE one another with the strength that God supplies. May it be so with me and with you.

¹ Stupid Things on Instruction Manuals by Paul Connor, found at <https://hmvf.co.uk/topic/12400-stupid-things-on-instruction-manuals/>

² Commentary support from Beyond the Lectionary Text: 1 Peter 4:1-11, by Lora Copley found at <https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/non-rcl-starters/1-peter-41-11/>

³ Discussion of Greek *ektenes* found at <https://www.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/index.php?view=article&aid=34049>