

**Building the House of Love:
STEWARDS OF GRACE**

I Peter 4:7-11

Who owns the House of Love?

A sermon preached by
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I've always been fascinated with house construction. When I was a kid and a house would be going up in my neighborhood, I would go over after the workday was finished and poke around in the unfinished house, trying to understand how the house was going to be laid out. When Carey and Abby were moving to Fort Smith, we looked at over 50 different houses online and visited 25 or 30 in person. We didn't like all of them, but it was fascinating to see how many different configurations of living space there could be in our price range. No matter how bizarre some of them were, at some point, somebody thought that was a good idea. It was an interesting process.

Since Easter, we have been in the process of building the house of love. I hope that has been an interesting process for you, too. We have been looking at the First Letter of Peter, a very rich but often neglected resource for our Christian life. In First Peter, we see a vision of the life God calls us to lead. Week by week we have been putting that vision together, and we are calling it the house of love.

Remember, that phrase came from Henri Nouwen, who wrote in one of his books: "Our true house is not the house of fear, in which the powers of hatred and violence rule, but the house of love, where God resides. Through the spiritual life we gradually move from the house of fear to the house of love."¹ So we are moving, by God's grace, from the house of fear into the house of love. The house of love that we have been constructing for several weeks has a foundation of hope; it has walls of holiness; and Jesus Christ himself is the Cornerstone. It is ready for us to move in.

But before we can move into the house, we need one more thing. We need a deed to the house. We need to establish ownership. Who owns the house of love? God owns the house. Everything ultimately belongs to God: our lives, our families, our church, our community, our world. It is all God's. It's all a gift of God's grace.

So what are we? Are we just renters in the house of God? Or worse yet, squatters or freeloaders? No, we are more than that. We are stewards of the grace of God. What does that mean? In Bible times, stewards were trusted servants of the household. Sometimes they were free; sometimes they were slaves. But they were always obedient to the Master of the house and dedicated to the welfare of the family.

I Peter says we are called to live as "*good stewards of the manifold grace of God.*"² We are the servants of God, called to take care of the Master's house. Everything we have and everything we are, everything we believe in and everything we hope for—all of it is a gift, and we are called to take care of the gift we have received.

So the question of the day is, "How do we live as stewards in the house of love?" How do we take care of these gifts that we have been given? How do we glorify God with our lives, in our families, in our church, in our community, and in our care of the world? This great text out of I Peter has some pointers.

First, STEWARDS WATCH THE TIME. I Peter 4:7 says, *“The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers.”* The early Church lived with the fervent hope that Jesus would soon return and establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Throughout the New Testament, you see this hope expressed over and over, that Jesus would soon come back and make things right. After about a hundred years, the Church began to realize that Jesus had never set a timetable for his return, and he had made things right in the first place. We still believe that Christ will return at the end of history to bring God’s Kingdom on earth, but we don’t pretend to know when that will be.

Nevertheless, any given day could be the day the Lord returns. Or any given day could mark the end of our earthly life and our transition into eternal life. There are no guarantees, so stewards watch the time. We should live prepared at any moment to die, and we should live so that if Jesus comes, he will catch us doing something worthy of a good steward of his grace.

Time has been much on our minds during this pandemic. Time seems to drag for many of us, out of school or out of work. For many, time is short, as they have come down with the virus, and face an immanent end to life. Sometimes it’s hard to remember what life was like before the pandemic, even though that was only two months ago. And many of us are engaged in conversation now about the right timing for re-opening our church, our businesses, and our country. Every moment of every day right now is overshadowed by the coronavirus.

In 1948, C. S. Lewis wrote an essay because the threat of the atomic bomb was new and frightening and hanging like a dark cloud over civilization. The essay was entitled, “On Living In An Atomic Age,” and though Lewis wrote over 70 years ago, his words speak eloquently to us today:

In one way we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. “How are we to live in an atomic age?” I am tempted to reply: “Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents.”

In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. ...This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened

sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.³

I'm not saying that we should not observe all the safety precautions necessary with the virus in our midst. But I am saying that we should do as Paul said, and redeem the time,⁴ not living in fear, but using every opportunity to be good stewards of God's house. Stewards watch the time. Every moment is both precious and important. So be serious and disciplined for the sake of living in the house of love.

Second, STEWARDS COVER EVERYTHING WITH LOVE. Stewards are servants of the Master of the house, and when the house is the house of love, and the Master is the Lord of love, it follows that love is a priority for any good steward. And so our Scripture says: "*Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining.*"⁵ This is not news unless you are totally un-acquainted with the Christian faith. We are a community of love. The key commandments are to love God and love your neighbor. Jesus told his disciples to love one another as he had loved them. When we have love in our hearts and love characterizes our church, we show the world what God is like.

Love covers our mistakes. Love heals the wounds of conflict and resentment. Love allows us to live in community with a diverse group of people, some of whom may not even agree with us on every issue. It's OK; we love them anyway! Love can be painful sometimes, but ultimately it is the one thing that makes us fully human. Of faith, hope, and love, Paul said, "*the greatest of these is love.*"⁶

Bill Wilson is a pastor in a very rough part of Brooklyn, in New York City. He has been shot, stabbed, and had a member of his staff murdered. His church has an extensive bus ministry to bring kids to Sunday School. There was a Puerto Rican lady who had come to know the Lord, and she came to Bill Wilson to ask how she could work in the church. She could hardly speak any English. Bill didn't know how to use her, but she was insistent, so he finally said, "OK, I'll put you on a bus. Ride a different bus every week and just love the kids."

So every week this Puerto Rican lady would board a bus, find the worst-looking kid on the bus, put the child on her lap, and whisper throughout the ride the only words she had learned in English: "I love you. Jesus loves you."

After a few months, the lady became attached to a particular kid on one of the buses. She asked to stay on that bus. This little boy didn't speak. He came to Sunday School every week with his sister, and he sat on the woman's lap, but he never uttered a sound. She, however, never let up with her talking, telling him over and over again, "I love you. Jesus loves you." After weeks of this, one day, to her amazement, the little boy turned around and stammered out, "I love you, too." Then he put his arms around her and gave her a big hug.

That was about 2:30 on a Sunday afternoon. About 6:30 that evening, New York City police were called to an alley where the little boy's body had been found. His mother, a drug addict, had beaten him to death and thrown him off a fire escape.⁷

Without a doubt, some of the last words that little boy heard were "I love you, and Jesus loves you." He was covered with love because a Puerto Rican disciple of Jesus was a steward of grace. She couldn't even speak English, but she had offered what little gifts she had in God's service.

So finally, STEWARDS SERVE WITH THEIR GIFTS. We believe that every single follower of Jesus has a particular gift or set of gifts for service to the Kingdom. God has wired you up for ministry in some way, and your highest fulfillment as a child of God will be to figure out your gifts and exercise your gifts in Kingdom ministry. This is the centerpiece of our Scripture lesson today: *"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."*⁸

The New Testament speaks in several places about the spiritual gifts God gives to each disciple of Jesus.⁹ As stewards of the grace of God, we use our gifts for him. They're all different, but when all the pieces come together, it's like a multi-faceted masterpiece dedicated to the glory of God.

In Moorhead, Minnesota, there is a small Lutheran school called Concordia College. Our own Breck Cogswell is an alumna of that school and its outstanding choir, which has come to our church on several occasions. One of their biggest events every year is the choir's Christmas concert. Each December, their amazing choir and a full orchestra give a musical performance in the concert hall at the college, and people come from miles around.

But the preparation for the concert actually begins months ahead, because not only does the choir and orchestra have to prepare the music, there is also a unique and amazing backdrop created for each year's concert. The backdrop is digitally designed by a faculty member, then professionally printed on large pieces of paper. Then dozens of volunteers from the college and community wallpaper the printed paper onto large panels which fit together to create a coordinated masterpiece.

When the massive wall is completed, they place it behind the choir. It has the appearance of an enormous, gorgeous stained-glass window. The weekend of the concert, the people who helped put it together always arrive early, along with their friends and neighbors. They want to see "their" work of art and point out their contribution.

Every year in Moorhead, Minnesota, dozens of unknown, ordinary people lend a hand in a project that is much bigger than anything they could ever accomplish on

their own. Weeks later, the result is a spectacular and beautiful masterpiece.¹⁰ That's how stewards serve together for the glory of God.

That, finally, is the point. **STEWARDS SERVE FOR THE GLORY OF GOD.** Our Scripture says we serve “*so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.*”¹¹ This is why we want to be good stewards of the grace of God. It's not about us. It's not about getting our own needs met. The house of love is God's house. God is the Master; we are the servants. We do what we do to glorify God, and in the process, we receive God's blessing.

We are called to live as stewards of the grace of God. The house of love belongs to God, but the more we act as good stewards, the more we develop a sense of ownership. The house of God becomes our house, too. We belong here, and it belongs to us. Owning the house of God is not about being consumers of religion, but about being producers of ministry. It's not about meeting our own needs, but about serving the needs of others. It's not about being fed; it's about feeding those who are hungry physically and spiritually. The more we understand this fundamental mind-shift of stewardship, the more mature our faith will be. The more God will be glorified.

Stewards watch the time, cover everything with love, serve with their gifts, all for the glory of God. That's how we make our contribution to the Kingdom. That's how we build the House of Love.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1987), n.p.

² I Peter 4:10.

³ C.S.Lewis, “On Living In An Atomic Age”

<https://elynews.com/2020/03/24/living-in-the-age-of-coronavirus/>.

⁴ Ephesians 5:16, Colossians 4:5.

⁵ I Peter 4:8-9.

⁶ I Corinthians 13:13.

⁷ Bill Wilson, *Charisma*, October 1996, in *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Nashville: Baker). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Wilson_\(pastor\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Wilson_(pastor)).

⁸ I Peter 4:10-11.

⁹ Romans 8, I Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4.

¹⁰ Mike Yaconelli, *Messy Spirituality* (Zondervan, 2002), pp. 118-119. And thanks, Breck, for updating the illustration!

¹¹ I Peter 4:11.