

“Peter Principles - P.L.U.S.”

PRAY – LOVE – USE – SERVE

1 Peter 4:7-11 ¹

Have you heard of “the Peter Principle”? The Peter Principle argues that in hierarchical organizations, which most organizations are, members are promoted so long as they do their work competently. Sooner or later, though, they are promoted to a position at which they are no longer competent, and there they remain, being unable to earn further promotions.

The employee’s incompetence is not necessarily the result of the higher-ranking position being more difficult. The issue may simply be that this new job is different from the job in which the employee previously excelled, requiring different skills that the employee may not possess.²

As intriguing as this idea might be, our focus this morning is not on “the Peter Principle” in this sense, but rather on four “Peter Principles” that grow out of this morning’s text. These four principles can be simply put as: (1) **pray!** (2) **love!** (3) **use!** and (4), **serve!** An easy way to remember these is the acronym, “P.L.U.S.”

Here’s this morning’s text once more, and then we’ll consider each principle in turn: *The end of the world is coming soon. Therefore, be earnest and disciplined in your prayers. Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins. Cheerfully share your home with those who need a meal or a place to stay.*

God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of serving others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen (1 Peter 4:7-11).

Our text begins with the affirmation that “*the end of the world is coming soon,*” and this provides the context for all that follows. The many challenges we’ve faced this year make such a statement believable, don’t they?

The truth is that every generation of Christians, from the very first until now, has thought it was experiencing “the end times”³; and still the End has not yet come. Jesus told His disciples that “**No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows. And since you don’t know when they will happen, stay alert and keep watch**” (Mark 13:32-33).⁴

There’s a story about Martin Luther in which he was asked what he would do if he knew for sure and certain that Jesus would return this very day. According to the story, Luther answered that he would “plant a tree and pay his taxes,” meaning that since he always lived in view of Christ’s Return, he didn’t need to change anything at all.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on October 11, 2020.

² Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hall, *The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong* (1969). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Principle

³ See, for example, Mark 13:30; John 21:23; 1 Thessalonians 4:15.

⁴ Peter wrote this letter to first-generation Christians who were experiencing persecution for their faith, urging them to remain faithful both to God and to each other in their difficulties. Peter used the Hope of Jesus’ Return “as an incentive for upright living and responsible service to God,”⁴ an approach some have called “eschatological ethics,”⁴ which seems like an appropriate term to me. *Therefore*, Peter wrote, *be earnest and disciplined in your prayers* (4:7). Another way to say that might be, “**Stay focused! Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing!**”

The real question for us, then, is what it is that is our duty until the King returns. That's what today's "Peter Principles" are all about, so let's get started. We'll only be able to say a little bit about each, but you'll get the idea, I think.

Pray. The first of our four principles has to do with prayer. We talked about prayer last week when we looked at Edward Lorenz's "butterfly effect," and here are two stories about how that effect can work.

Pastor Tony Evans was in Columbia, South Carolina to preach at a crusade being held in the University of South Carolina football stadium. Thousands had gathered for the evening session, but news reports indicated a serious thunderstorm was on the way. In fact, the storm was expected to hit at 7 p.m.—the exact time the meeting was scheduled to start.

As the sky grew darker and darker, it seemed inevitable that the meeting would have to be cancelled. A group of preachers and other church leaders decided to gather to pray about their situation. Evans noted that the preachers prayed what many would consider safe prayers—ones quite undemanding of God.

Then, a woman named Linda spoke up, asking if she could pray. Linda's prayer went something like this: "Lord, thousands have gathered to hear the Good News about your Son. It would be a shame on your name for us to have all these unbelievers go without the gospel when you control the weather, and you don't stop it. In the name of Jesus Christ, address this storm!" So ended the prayer meeting.

Everyone took their places under the dark, threatening sky. The leader of the crusade told the people, "We'll go as long as we can." Umbrellas sprouted up among the crowd. A man sitting next to Linda opened his umbrella and offered to shield her as well, but Linda refused.

Evans says he and his wife watched as the rain clouds came up to the stadium and then split in two. The storm rained on both sides of the stadium and came back together on the other side. All of those gathered for the crusade stayed dry. Linda prayed with unyielding faith, and the clouds parted!⁵

While Erwin McManus was pastoring in South Dallas, his small congregation began to grow. Looking for a place to build a larger church building, the leadership spotted an acre of land for sale. Given its location near downtown Dallas, it seemed strange that the property was available. Excited at their good fortune, this small group of people—many on welfare—began to pray that the site would soon be theirs. Eventually, they were able to purchase the property after receiving financial help from an association of churches.

As the congregation began the process of obtaining building permits, they discovered the property had been declared "unbuildable." Their acre of land in downtown Dallas was nothing more than a worthless landfill.

Pastor McManus wrote, "We had bought an acre of garbage. Several core samples were taken. From what I understood, they went at least twenty-five feet deep and found nothing but trash. All I could do was ask our congregation to pray with me and believe that God was with us and that he would even use the worst of human mistakes to perform the greatest of miracles."

After months of prayer, a woman from the congregation told McManus that since they had asked God to turn the land into something useful, surely it had been taken care of. Feeling God's confirmation of her words, McManus asked for more core samples to be taken. This time the researchers found soil, not trash.

⁵ Tony Evans, The Brooklyn Tabernacle Pastors & Leaders Conference, April 16, 2007.

“How did this happen?” he asked. “Was it because the core sample was in a different part of the land? Or could it be that God had actually performed a miracle and changed the landfill to good land?”

“I don’t know; but here’s what I know. What I do know is that the same realtor who sold the property to me came back and offered me three times the amount he had sold it for once he heard the clearance to build had actually come through. What I do know is that the previous owners could not build on the property, but we could. What I do know is that we were told the property was worthless and unusable.

“I cannot tell you what happened beneath the ground at 2815 South Ervay Street. All I can tell you is what I know—and that is that God took my failure and performed a miracle. Today Cornerstone worships on that acre of land in a sanctuary we built ourselves.”⁶ Pray on, my friends. Pray on!

Love. Peter Principle #1 is PRAY. Principle #2 is LOVE: *Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins* (1 Peter 4:8). The believers to whom Peter was writing were finding their faith in Jesus to be more costly than they had expected, and their response to this situation was a matter of concern, because they were turning on each other in their frustration, becoming fragmented, and failing to show Christian love for their fellow believers.

It’s still often the case today that we find it easier to be cross with our loved ones or to be mean to the dog than to attempt reconciliation with fellow believers with whom we have hurt feelings of some sort. Human nature hasn’t really changed very much, after all.

One of the books my Dad asked me to read as a teen was *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. The part of the story I remember best is that Franklin, by his own confession, was rather a jerk as a young man. He was proud, arrogant, and rude, and he tells the story about how he experienced transformation into one of the most skillful negotiators of his day.

As a part of that transformation, Franklin urged his friends to “Remember not only to say the right thing in the right place, but far more difficult still, to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment.”⁷ We could use such a reminder in these fractious days in our nation, could we not?

We do well to remember that we are called to express God’s Love to every person that we encounter, whether we agree with them or not. We need to remember that “*Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance*” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). These principles are to be implemented in all of our relationships, whether at church, at work, at home, or in political matters.

Notice that our text tells us that *deep love for each other . . . covers a multitude of sins*.⁸ Love doesn’t “cover” a multitude of sins by “sweeping them under the rug” or by “papering over” them. Love covers a multitude of sins by choosing to give the benefit of the doubt, by choosing to overlook those offenses.

At their fiftieth anniversary celebration, a couple was asked the secret of their long and happy marriage. The woman responded that “On my wedding day, I decided to make a list of ten of my husband’s faults that I would overlook for the sake of our marriage.”

⁶ Erwin McManus, *An Unstoppable Force* (Group, 2001), pp.151-153.

⁷ Ben Franklin, *Quotations of Benjamin Franklin* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 2003), p. 16.

⁸ 1 Peter 4:8; Proverbs 10:12; Matthew 6:14-15; Luke 7:47; James 5:20

When asked to describe some of the ten things on that list, she replied, “To tell you the truth, I never did get around to making the list. But whenever my husband did something that made me hopping mad, I said to myself, *Lucky for him that’s one of the ten!*”⁹ Go and do likewise.

Use. Peter Principle #1 is PRAY. Principle #2 is LOVE. And Principle #3 is USE the gifts God has given you to encourage others and to build up the church. Hear once more how Peter put this one:

God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of serving others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen (1 Peter 4:10-11).

There are about thirty spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament, of which “speaking” and “serving” are two; but there is hardly any limit to the ways in which we can use our abilities to build up the Body of Christ and advance the Kingdom of God. I want to tell you about three very different ways people have used their gifts to serve their Lord as a way to spur your own imagination about how God might use you.

First, do you know that the nation of Japan has been experiencing a decades-long spiritual revival in which many are coming to faith in Jesus through the organ music of Johann Sebastian Bach? Yuko Maruyama, once a devout Buddhist, wrote that “Bach introduced me to God, Jesus, and Christianity. When I play a fugue, I can feel Bach talking to God.”

Lutheran theologian Yoshikazu Tokuzen has called Bach’s music “a vehicle of the Holy Spirit,” and Swedish archbishop Nathan Söderblom famously called Bach’s cantatas “the fifth Gospel.” Bach’s music reflects the perfection and beauty of the created order, and Bach very intentionally wrote his music as an expression of worship, ending many of his manuscripts with the letters “SDG,” for *Soli Deo Gloria*, or “Glory to God alone!”¹⁰

Few humans attain the artistic heights of Bach, but many of us have more ordinary skills . . . such as hairdressing, for example. Hairstylist Teresa Russo-Cox founded “Hairdressers in the Marketplace”—HIM—in 1998 after trying out numerous volunteer positions in her church. None felt like the right fit for her skills and passions, and for a while, she wrestled with God. “Why did you give me a talent that’s so much about vanity?” she prayed. “How can I serve you?”

Teresa says God answered those prayers with a vision for a group that communicates God’s love and care to women in need using her very particular skills. At one event in 2006, the clients were teen girls going through drug and alcohol rehab. The hairdressers were surprised by the girls’ reactions: “They told us they hadn’t had ‘sober’ fun before—they’d never experienced that.”

“I had no self-esteem,” says Doreen, who was invited to another Day of Beauty after she and her two preschool children left her alcoholic, abusive husband. “That day gave me a boost on the outside, but it helped me on the inside, too. They made me feel beautiful, special, and worthwhile.”¹¹

The volunteers of HIM host monthly Day of Beauty sessions where women in need receive free pampering, from haircuts to manicures, and also hear about God’s love for them. HIM also goes

⁹ Carl Windsor, *On This Day: Daily Inspiration for the History Buff, the Trivia Lover, and the Innately Curious* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), reading for Valentine’s Day.

¹⁰ Uwe Simon-Netto, “Bach in Japan,” *Christian History & Biography* (Summer 2007).

¹¹ Keri Wyatt Kent, “Pampered with a Purpose,” *Today’s Christian Woman* (November/December 2006), 54-55.

to nursing homes for the poor, homeless shelters, and facilities for the mentally handicapped to provide free haircuts.

Here's one more. When thirteen year-old Lauren Blakemore, a member of Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive cancer, she found comfort in a baby blanket made for her before her birth by a neighbor named Mildred. The "Miss Mildred" blanket was Lauren's favorite throughout childhood, and it gave her strength and comfort through the fatigue, nausea, and sleepless nights of her battle with cancer.

Fourteen rounds of chemotherapy later, Lauren was able to beat the cancer, and God inspired her to raise money to provide "Miss Mildred" blankets to all the children on the cancer ward, "because chemotherapy makes you cold all the time." "When I was first diagnosed with cancer," Lauren said, "I knew God had a plan for my life, and these blankets are part of that plan."¹² And you probably know that we have "Miss Mildred" blanket maker right here at CBF.

C. S. Lewis rightly noted that "The work of a [Bach], the work of a [hairdresser], and the work of a [blanket-maker] become spiritual on precisely the same condition, the condition of being offered to God, of being done humbly, 'as to the Lord.' This does not, of course, mean that it is for anyone a mere toss-up whether he should [cut hair] or compose symphonies. A mole must dig to the glory of God and a cock must crow."¹³ What is it that YOU must do?

Our human tendency is to compare ourselves to others whom we perceive to be more gifted than ourselves; but that never works very well. When our resurrected Lord forgave Peter's betrayal and told him to "*Follow me*," Peter pointed to John, "the beloved disciple," and asked, "*What about him, Lord?*" And Jesus replied, "*If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You follow me*" (John 21:19-22).

Serve. Peter Principle #1 is PRAY. Principle #2 is LOVE. Principle #3 is USE. And Principle #4 is SERVE. Peter told his readers to *cheerfully share your home with those who need a meal or a place to stay* (1 Peter 4:9).

Peter was reminding these believers of the need to show hospitality to traveling teachers, missionaries, and preachers in a day when travel was much more dangerous and when safe places to stay were few and far between. He was reminding them to show hospitality to other believers who may have moved to their town in order to escape persecution elsewhere.

Most of those to whom Peter wrote were relatively poor tradespeople and many were slaves, so providing this sort of hospitality would have been both challenging and costly, perhaps including making provision for worship space in their homes, food for shared meals, and the wine and bread for communion.¹⁴ It was not a small thing he asked, a very specific way to love each other deeply.

The award-winning documentary *Lost Boys of Sudan* follows the lives of young African refugees who started life anew in America after civil war destroyed their families in Sudan. These young men, most of whom were under 18 years old, struggled to survive in Africa where they faced lions and local militia . . . and they continued to struggle in America, where they faced loneliness as they learn an entirely new way of life.

The film focuses on a particular group of boys who were relocated by the U.S. government into an apartment complex in Houston. After job training, several of the boys headed out into the workforce, trying to become self-supporting. In one scene, Peter Kon Dut goes out to lunch with

¹² Ruth Schenk, "Lauren's Mission," *The Southeast Outlook* (November 24, 2005).

¹³ C. S. Lewis in *The Weight of Glory*, cited in *Christianity Today*, vol. 35, no. 14.

¹⁴ Richard Vinson, "1 Peter," in Richard Vinson, Richard Wilson, and Watson Mills, "1 & 2 Peter, Jude," *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2010), pp. 204-205.

two coworkers from his factory job. In heavily accented English, Peter tells them about his struggles in America:

“I see different things in this month here. Everybody is busy. You can’t get friends. Time is money—but in Africa, there is no ‘time is money.’ Everybody is busy here. How am I going to find friends here? I feel like going back and saying, **“There are no friends here.”**”

When it comes to *“offering hospitality without grumbling,”* Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase noted that “Christian hospitality refers to the active desire to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ. It describes a genuine love for others who are not yet a part of the faith community, an outward focus, a reaching out to those not yet known, a love that motivates church members to openness and adaptability, a willingness to change behaviors in order to accommodate the needs and receive the talents of newcomers. . . .

“We, too, were once strangers to the faith, residing outside the community where we now find rich resources of meaning, grace, hope, friendship, and service. **You and I belong to the Body of Christ because of someone’s hospitality.”**

According to Bishop Schnase, “In most communities, 40 to 60 percent of people have no church relationship. A majority of our neighbors on the streets where we live [right here in Oakland Mills] do not know the name of a pastor to call when they face unexpected grief. Most of our coworkers have a few close friends and a circle of acquaintances but do not know the sustaining grace that a church offers.

“Most of the families with whom we travel to our children’s soccer tournaments and band concerts, most of the students we meet from the university, and most of the people who repair our cars and serve us in restaurants do not have a forum where they learn about the essentials of peace, justice, genuine repentance, forgiveness, love, and unmerited grace.”

You’ll not be surprised when I point out that it takes *time* to nurture relationships. It takes *time* to offer hospitality; and Rick Warren was right when he wrote that **“The best use of life is love. The best expression of love is time. The best time to love is now.”**

Jesus is coming to Earth, again, my friends. What if it were today? What do you want to be found doing when He comes? I suggest to you that these four Peter Principles are a pretty good outline for how to organize our time and our activities:

Pray (faithfully)

Love (deeply)

Use (your gifts)

Serve (your neighbor)

Stay Focused. Let’s roll!