August 8, 2021

Rick Myatt

HOW TO BE A GIANT

1 Peter 4:1-7

Up in Northern California in the Humboldt Redwoods State Park there was a tree that, for a time, had the title of tallest tree in the world. It was called the Dyerville Giant. It stood 362 feet high, taller that a 36 story building. There is an enormous pine tree on the bank behind our house. I was looking at it this week. It doesn’t look all that healthy, and that concerns me because it is only 30 or 40 feet from our house. This thing is huge, probably 60 feet tall. The Dyerville Giant was 6 times that tall! The trunk had a diameter of 17 feet, a circumference of 52 feet and it weighed 500 tons. In March 1991 there was extremely heavy rain in that area for some time, which loosened the soil. Redwoods have a very shallow root system, and it turned out that this massive, nearly 2000 year old tree, had root rot. On March 24 after a couple of nearby trees had fallen, the Dyerville Giant crashed to the ground. A person who was a half mile away said it sounded like a train wreck. Seismographs recorded the impact and vibrations from it were felt 10 miles away.

Even in dying that giant of a tree had impact. Today I want to talk about impact. All of us want to have impact. Every human being longs for significance. At the end of the day, much of significance boils down to the effect we have on other people. None of us wants to go through life without making a mark of any kind. We don’t want to live in such a way that it would t matter whether we existed or not. I haven’t been watching the Olympics, but I know from previous events that in diving, the goal is to hit the water so cleanly that there is almost no splash at all and the diver doesn’t make a ripple. Is that how you want to go through life, or would you rather your life is more like “cannonball!”? Ask yourself this. Your good friends are having a social event and you are invited, but despite their urgings you are unable to attend. Later you ask a friend who attended how it was. Which would be your preferred answer. “It was fine, but it wasn’t as fun because you weren’t there. We really missed you.” Or would you prefer, “Oh, you weren’t there? I didn’t notice.”

Laurie and I have been doing a lot of baby sitting for our grandchildren, though Laurie carries the lion’s share of that duty. It is exhausting, but we love being with those precious kids. We also know that this is a season that won’t last forever. There will be a time when we won’t get to play so large a role in their lives. Recently one day I went solo taking care of Wesley, who calls me Bapaw. Carissa told me that after I was gone and he woke up from his nap, the first thing he said was “Bapaw?” I loved hearing that, because I want to make a difference. If you’re not making a difference, you’re not really needed, and that’s sad.

How can we make a difference? How can we live a cannonball life? How can we be giants, with huge impact? Today we will get some insight on that by looking at 1 Peter 4:1-7.

CHALLENGE: HAVE THE APPROACH TO LIFE THAT JESUS HAD

This passage has one main command. The command is this: “Since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude.” Peter says we should emulate Jesus. We should have his attitude. We should live as he lived and think as he did. You can find no better model for making an impact than Jesus. At the end of his monumental 7 volume history of Christianity, historian Kenneth Scott Latourette wrote of Jesus, “No life ever lived on this planet has been so influential in the affairs of men as that of Christ. From that brief life…has flowed a more powerful force for the triumphal waging of man’s long battle than any other ever known by the human race.” History is still divided on the life of Jesus Christ. There is no part of life that has not been affected by him. If you want to have an effect, he is the supreme model for how to do that.

Peter says “arm yourselves with the same attitude.” Notice the use of the word “arm.” That is a military word. It’s about taking up weapons. You arm yourself when you are preparing to fight. You don’t pick up a gun to prepare to play badminton. You don’t need body armor for a rousing game of chess. Right off the bat that tells us that this is a call to battle. If we want to have impact like Jesus did, we’d better be ready to fight for it. So I should go out and get some weaponry, maybe some serious firepower, like an AR15 assault rifle? Not, not at all. It’s not that kind of battle. This is a spiritual battle, and physical weapons, tactics and power are of no use in it. This is a warning that our efforts will be opposed. Having impact on people, thus living a significant life, won’t be like floating down a lazy river in an inner tube. It is going to be a battle. Get ready to go to war.

If we are going to be like Jesus we will have to be willing to suffer the way he suffered. Uh oh. That doesn’t sound good. Jesus’ attitude and approach to life got him rejected, tortured and executed. Following Jesus can take us down that same road. We know that followers of Christ are being killed and imprisoned every single day, right now. So, yes, following Christ can mean physically suffering as he did. But having Jesus’ attitude and suffering as he did is broader than that.

The end of verse 1 is enigmatic. “Whoever suffers in the body is done with sin.” That sounds like Peter is saying if you suffer physically then you won’t sin any more. You’re done with sin. But that can’t be right. It contradicts 1 John 1:8, which says if we claim we have no sin we are liars. It also contradicts Romans 3:10 that says of humans “there is no one righteous, not even one.” If we could rid ourselves of sin by suffering, then Jesus didn’t need to die for us. He could have just told us to go suffer for a while, then we’d be done with sin, so we’d be good with God. Another problem is that it is not true that people who have suffered don’t ever sin again. It would be great if it did mean that, but even those who have been persecuted will still sin. So clearly this can’t mean what it sounds like.

This has caused Bible scholars to scramble to understand this verse. Their possible interpretations of it are all over the map. Some sound like theological mumbo jumbo. What then does this mean? I think the NIV translators confused things by the way they translated the beginning of verse 2. The word translated “as a result,” should be translated “in order that” or “so that.” Then those verses read “whoever suffers in the body is done with sin, in order that they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.” Okay, I still don’t get it. How does that help?

I believe Peter is using the word “sin” in a particular way. He intends it to stand for a way of living. I think he equates it with the phrase “Live their lives for evil human desires.” That’s the sin he means. That idea takes center stage in the following verses. He says in verse 3 that his readers had spent enough time in the past “doing what pagans choose to do,” which is living for “evil human desires.” This passage is about being done with that approach to life.

What evil desires are in view here? Peter mentions debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and idolatry. Hey, all my life I’ve been a good boy. I never got involved in debauchery, orgies, carousing and partying. So this passage must not relate to me, right? Wrong.

What makes human desires evil? Is it that they are on the Terrible Ten list, or maybe there’s a Nasty Nine? Or maybe there’s way more on the list than that. Maybe it’s the the Horrible Hundred. The Good Boy of today might say he hasn’t done any of the Horrible Hundred so he’s good to go. It should give us pause to consider that the Pharisees had a way longer list than the Horrible Hundred and thought they avoided them all. And Jesus said they were a bunch of whitewashed tombs, full of death inside.

So, again, what makes a human desire evil? It is not always the nature of the desire itself. Sometimes that’s true. A desire to harm, abuse or kill other people is evil. But sometimes the problem is not the desire itself, but its place in our lives. When it is more important to us to have or do that thing we desire than it is to do what God tells us to do, it has become an evil desire. It could be a desire for money, or sex, or approval, or success, or safety or anything else. When we are focused on getting something or doing something that we think we must have for ourselves, and we refuse to choose obeying God rather than that thing, it is evil. It is evil because it will inevitably hurt us and other people.

Jesus Christ approached life by doing whatever the Father told him to do rather than pursuing his own desires. In John 6:38 Jesus said, “I have come down from heaven not to do my will, but to do the will of him who sent me.” In John 4:34 Jesus said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.” He said his food, that which sustained him, was to do the will of the Father. He chose to do that even though he knew it was going to lead to great pain and suffering for him. He did not take the normal human route of taking care of himself as the first priority, then maybe helping people out after he looked out for himself. He chose to do the will of the Father rather than to serve his own personal interests even when it was incomprehensibly costly for him. He suffered terribly because he continually made that choice.

Peter is saying that a person who chooses to be faithful to the Lord Jesus, who chooses to do God’s will regardless of what it costs, even though it means he will suffer rejection, ostracism, possibly even physical abuse or imprisonment, is making the same choice that Jesus did. He is done with sin in the sense of being done with living the way humans typically live. He is choosing the will of God over the usual human desires of feeling good, serving self, of safety and comfort. It does not mean that individual will never mess up and commit some individual sin, it means that he has chosen the same approach to life that Jesus exemplified, doing God’s will no matter what it takes. He’s done with the old sinful way of being driven by human desires.

There are many ways, both large and small, to make that choice. It might be loving someone who has treated you badly. It could be responding to a harsh comment from someone, maybe even a spouse, with gentleness and love. It could mean refusing to sacrifice time with your family when you have the chance to make a lot more money by working longer hours. The list is endless, but it comes down to living for the will of God, not for self.

We have to be ready to do battle, because this way of living is counter to everything our human nature tells us to do and it will be opposed. We absolutely will have to sacrifice self to live like this, so in that sense, we will suffer. It will be hard. Do you think it was easy for Jesus to do what he did? It was not. He made many, many terribly hard choices, and he felt the pull of taking the easy way out. In John 12:27-28 not long before his arrest, Jesus said, “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say, ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” But he never compromised. We, too, will feel that pull, so living for the will of God instead of for self will feel like suffering because it is so hard.

MOTIVATION: WHY SHOULD WE HAVE THIS APPROACH TO LIFE?

*It is the* ***only*** *way to make a difference*

Think logically about the alternatives that every person has. Peter reduces them down to 2. One is to live for evil human desires. Don’t get hung up on the word “evil” and envision only a wild and unrestrained lifestyle. Remember what makes it evil is that it is all about taking care of self, doing what I want to do, what feels good to me. In effect, it is living for my kingdom. A kingdom is the place where the king’s will rules. What the king wants is what is done. So my kingdom is the place where my will and my desires rule. That is one option. The only other option is to live for God’s kingdom. Peter describes that as living for God’s will. It is saying what determines what I do is what the Lord of all wants me to do. That’s living for his kingdom. That’s what Jesus meant in Matthew 6:33 when he said, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.”

At every moment of life, we are doing one or the other. We are living for our own kingdom, or we are living for God’s kingdom. The human default is to live for our own kingdom. Our culture in particular glorifies that approach to life and encourages it. But our human nature really doesn’t need much encouragement. Our nature just goes down that road with no urging required. In fact, the impulse to live for our own kingdom is knee jerk automatic and almost irresistible. We don’t have to think about living for our own kingdom, we do it as automatically as we breathe. It just happens. We have to consciously make the choice to go down a different road, and it’s not easy.

That means that pretty much every person you deal with is, down at the core of their being, pursuing option 1. They are living for their own kingdom. That brings us to an important point. **In order to make a difference, you have to *be* different**. If you are just doing what everybody else does, then no one will be particularly affected by you, except possibly in a negative way when your will clashes with their will. All your example can encourage them to do is to keep doing what they already do, pursuing their own kingdom. The only way you can have a positive, noticeable effect on others, is by being different. I recently was driving and stopped at a red light at a busy intersection. I noticed something unusual. Every other car stopped at the intersection was white. Our car was red. Which one do you think was most noticeable? The one that is different.

Our church has been meeting in hotels for 4 months now. We have met at two different hotels. I’ve noticed that the employees at both hotels have all been nice to us, and they’ve tried to be helpful, but within limits. They have jobs to do. They’re busy, and helping us with whatever we’re doing is usually not high on their to do list. So we get some help from them when necessary, but it’s usually not quite as quick and as easy as it could be. We have a considerable amount of equipment to bring into our space and set up on Sunday mornings. We have a big, heavy box with our sound board, microphones and cables in it. We have a keyboard, drums and guitars. We have speakers, monitors and music stands. We have to move all this stuff from the underground garage up an elevator to the 3rd floor room where we meet. The hotel has a number of baggage carts guests use to move their luggage. These are a big help for moving all our gear. Unfortunately, a couple of weeks ago there were no carts, which made our process slower and more difficult. Laurie asked a hotel employee who said they’d look for carts, but to no avail. I was in the garage next to the elevator with a bunch of our equipment. Vinnie had taken the drums upstairs and Jerry was parking his car. A woman who works at the front desk for the hotel came down and apologized for the lack of carts. I said it was all right, that we’d manage without them. Then she offered to help carry gear upstairs. I said, “That’s so kind of you, but you don’t need to do that. It’s not your job. We will get it done. A couple of our guys will be along to help.” But she insisted. She said she really wanted to help. I didn’t want to argue with her so I found a smaller equipment bag she could take up and said, “Here, why don’t you take this, if you insist.” She took it, then she grabbed one of the speakers. The speakers aren’t very big, but they are surprisingly heavy. I said, “Oh, no, that thing is too heavy.” She said, “It’s no problem. I work out a lot, and I often go on long hikes with packs heavier than this.” She cheerfully headed for the elevator hauling that bag in one hand and the speaker in another. That lady made a difference. She made a difference and was noticeable because she didn’t do what all the other employees and did what was expected. She was different because she went way beyond that, and the difference was remarkable.

If we want to have impact, if we want to make a difference in this world, we are going to have to be different. The only way to make that difference is to arm ourselves with the attitude of Jesus Christ. It is to choose not to do what comes naturally, but to live for the will of God, to live for his kingdom rather than our own. It means to sacrifice selfish interest to serve God. To do anything else is to be like everyone else. If we are like them we won’t make a difference.

It is crucial to remember why we would do that. We aren’t doing it to earn God’s favor or to keep him from getting mad at us. We are his beloved children in Christ, and nothing can separate us from his love. We choose this because it is the way to make a difference.

*The alternative is crazy*

In verse 3 Peter said, “For you have spent enough time in the past doing what the pagans choose to do.” You used to live the way the rest of the world lives, pursuing your own kingdom. It is what everyone does without even thinking about it. Perhaps you did not do the specific things that Peter identifies here. But we all lived the way the rest of the world did, living to take care of ourselves first and foremost.

Peter says, “You did your time living that way.” In other words, it’s time to be done with that life. It is important to notice that he says, “They will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.” In other words, they are going to answer to God for how they have lived. The problem is that attitude and approach to life is evil. Living for our own kingdom is the source of all the hurt, all the fighting, all the pollution, all the ugliness of this world. It is the source of all the evil that exists.

In other words, it is the cause of immeasurable harm and grief. God would not be good and he would not be just if he didn’t do something about it. So he will judge those who live like that. There will be consequences, and they will be severe. To continue living like that is foolish. It is crazy.

In Ephesians 4:22 Paul wrote, “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires.” The old way of life just corrupted, ruined our lives. It results in futility, restlessness, emptiness, bitterness and disillusionment, and estrangement from God and other people. **We came to Christ because it didn’t work! Why go back to it?** Especially since it ends in judgment from God. That’s just crazy.

This is alluding to that well known definition of insanity. It is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Some years ago Laurie and I found ourselves with no commitments on New Year’s Eve. Our usual way to celebrate that holiday is to be really exciting people and do nothing. That year we decided to at least do something. We chose to go to what was at the time one of our favorite restaurants for a nice dinner. We had a very nice time and some very good food, but in the car on the way home Laurie said she was not feeling well at all. When we got home the excitement started. Laurie was visited by that restaurant’s version of the ghost of Montezuma. He got his revenge on her. She spent the night rushing to the bathroom where lots of unpleasant things were happening. The next day was not the happy beginning of a Happy New Year. She felt like she’d have to improve to feel like death warmed over. We have not gone back to that restaurant since. I don’t think we’ll ever go back. Witnessing her travails made me shudder and I determined if there was even a chance that could happen to me if I went there, then I would not ever take that chance. As you can imagine, she is even more determined about that than I am.

My point here is that we learned a lesson from an unpleasant thing. Peter’s point is, shouldn’t we do the same? Shouldn’t we remember that we put our faith in Christ because that old life was not giving us anything like what we wanted? Given that, why would we ever want to go back to it?

Before I move on, I’d like to clarify verse 6. It also can potentially be a bit confusing. “For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.” Um, what now? Who are these dead people, and why was the gospel preached to them? Peter is referring to brothers and sisters in Christ, people his readers knew, but who had already died. By human judgment, the way things appear in this world, the gospel didn’t help them, because they died just like every else does, gospel or no gospel. So, judged from a purely human view point the gospel didn’t help them. But Peter says it helped them so that they would live in the spirit according to God. In other words, they might have physically died, but they still existed and would live eternally in his kingdom.

*It is the way to be ready*

Finally, Peter says, “the end of all things is near.” This is a big reason why we should live for God’s kingdom, not ours. That’s because our kingdoms are all going to end, but his will go on. If we are living in and for his kingdom we and what we are doing will go on as well.

A common response to this assertion by Peter is that he was wrong. He wrote that the end of all things is near, 2000 years ago. He thought it was going to happen soon, but he was wrong. It certainly does seem like Peter missed on that statement, doesn’t it? I’ve heard repeated predictions that the return of Jesus is imminent in my lifetime. You can find those kinds of predictions throughout history. Three well known theologians predicted Jesus would return in the year 500. Beatus of Liebana predicted April 793. Pope Sylvester I predicted the year 1000. Other predicted dates were 1260, 1370, 1524, 1666, because it contains the number 666, 1673, 1694, 1700, 1814, 1836, 1844, 1874, 1914, 1935, 1974, 1988, 1994, 2000, 2011, 2012, 2019, 2020 and F. Kenton Beshore of the World Bible Society has predicted Jesus will return before 2021 ends. Oh, and let’s not forget the prophetic hen of Leeds in England, that supposedly laid eggs with the words “Christ is coming” on them back in 1806. Do you notice what all of these dates have in common? They are remarkably consistent. They were all wrong. That being the case, why believe that the end is near?

We are not helped by the many preachers and presumed scholars who study all the prophecies about Jesus’ return and see the signs of his imminent return in the events occurring around us. As I’ve said, they always seem to be wrong, so why would anyone listen to them? I’ve heard them over and over for more than 50 years. I must admit I have gotten a somewhat jaundiced view of that entire venture. I believe those who keep looking for the signs of Jesus’ coming are on a big adventure in missing the point. I believe Peter was inspired by God when he wrote this letter. So I believe he was correct when he said so long ago that the end was near. But it wasn’t near the way so many people take it. Think of it this way. Many people think of the “end,” of the coming of Jesus as being like a cliff, and history is on a road heading toward the cliff. The question so many want to ask is “how much farther down the road is the cliff?” Peter clearly thought the road didn’t go much further before it would go over the cliff, and he was wrong. My contention is that everyone who looks at the end that way is wrong. The road is not running toward the cliff, but right along the edge of it. Have you ever been on one of those winding mountain roads that are narrow with a steep, ghastly drop-off right next to the edge of the road and maybe no guardrail? It’s a creepy experience. Well history is just like that. Yes, the end is near, because the edge of the cliff is *right there*, right next to us. All the “signs of the times” the Bible discusses are intended to tell us we are in the last days, meaning the entire time between when Jesus ascended into heaven and the day he comes back. All of the upsetting things we see, wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, pandemics, are just reminders that this is how it will be until Jesus comes back. They tell us the end is near, right next to us, and could happen at any time.

If Peter were here today he would say, “The end of all things is near,” and he would be as right today as he was 2000 years ago. He would be right because that event is right there, right next to us, as it has been right next to us since he wrote this letter. Nothing stands between us and its occurrence, except for God’s timing. So quit looking for the signs that it’s going to be next week, or next month, or next year, or in 10 years. Just know that it could be in 250 years, or in 1000 years, or next year, or it could be before you go to bed tonight.

Because of that, because it could happen even before we finish this service, don’t you think it would be a good idea to be living for God’s kingdom today? Everything that is not for his kingdom is going to be turned into dust. Why invest your time, your energy, your resources, your very life in dust? Why not be ready by doing what Jesus did, from this moment forward? I have now read several articles that have said the same thing I’ve heard from my son, Toby. He has been dealing with a flood of new Covid patients, almost all young, and all of them not vaccinated. And they most of them are saying the same thing. “I made a dumb, terrible choice, and I regret it big time. I should have gotten the vaccine. I wish I would have.” When you are sick and in the hospital with a potentially serious disease, it’s too late. That’s bad. But it would be far worse to look at our lives as we stand in the presence of our Lord and say, “I have made dumb, terrible choices and I regret it seriously. I wish I would have done differently.” The way to avoid that is to arm yourself with the same attitude that Jesus had and live for the will of God every single day.