*Love on Display*

1 Peter 1:22-25

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 1 Peter teaches us to live as elect exiles while we await the return of Christ. The backdrop to Peter’s message is the suffering his original audience was experiencing because of their faith; yet their temporal circumstances should not change their approach to life. They were to live for God’s glory and the advance of His kingdom, knowing that in eternity they will be rewarded. The early part of the letter develops this theme by giving general instructions for Christian living. The command *like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves in all your behavior* is the chief command of the book. Because we have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, we are to reflect the holiness of God in all our actions.

 In the paragraph we just read, a new element is introduced to the process. 1:22-2:8 emphasize the role God’s word plays in our spiritual growth, for the Spirit of God uses the word of God to do the work of God in the people of God. The study and application of God’s word is inseparable from our pursuit of holiness.

My original intention was to deal with the entire paragraph today. However, to do that I would have to either gloss over the command given in vs. 22 or limit my comments on the role Scripture in our lives. Neither option seemed good. So today we will look at the command of vs. 22-23a. Next week we will focus on the role God’s word plays in the process.

 In vs. 22, we have a cause-and-effect relationship described. Cause-and-effect statements follow a logical sequence. If statement A is true, then statement B should be your response. The causal statement is that the believer has purified their soul. This purification is first work of Christ, which we focused on last week. Sin corrupts us, rendering us unclean before God. Our soul, which refers to the part of us that is eternal and relates to God, was dead. Yet Jesus bore our sin in His body on the cross, purifying us from its corruption. He does this through spiritual heart surgery, as our heart of stone that was dead towards God is removed. In its place we are given a heart of flesh that is alive towards God and able to respond to Him. All of this is captured in the idea of our souls being purified. Sin and all its effects are expunged through God’s gracious dealing in salvation.

 This purification is done in obedience to the truth. Again, we will focus on the role of God’s word in this process next week. Here I want us to see how belief is synonymous with obedience. Faith in Christ means that we believe the message about Him, trust Him for salvation, submit to Him as Lord, and follow Him as King. Obedience reminds us that, although it is God who saves us and changes us into the image of His Son, we are not robots in the process. We must respond to the gospel, and we must engage in the process of spiritual growth. God has purified our souls, having cleansed them with the blood of Christ and giving us His righteousness. Yet the daily expression of that righteousness requires effort. We must kill the flesh and its evil desires and walk by the Spirit. We must take every thought captive to Christ and give no room for sin. God has purified us; yet we must obey the truth if we are to express this purity in life. This is why Peter says *you have purified your souls in obedience to the truth.* We must respond to what God has initiated.

 This whole concept is introduced with the word *since*, indicating that Peter’s original audience have already purified their souls in obedience to the truth, pointing back to the once-for-all work of Christ on their behalf. Any time we talk about spiritual growth, we must remind ourselves of the gospel. This is what rests behind Jerry Bridges’ wonderful counsel to preach the gospel to ourselves every day. When we sin, we preach the gospel to ourselves by remembering that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. He already paid for that sin on the cross. We are free. Yet we also preach the gospel to ourselves when we are tempted, reminding ourselves that Jesus died to set us free from sin and death. We don’t have to act like that anymore. Being redeemed by the precious, unblemished, and spotless blood of Christ causes us to hate sin because it spurns His grace, makes light of His death, and brings shame to His name. This motivates us to lay aside sin and to live pure lives in obedience to the truth.

 If you are happy to embrace sin, there is something amiss with your faith. If you are struggling against sin, it is an indication that God is at work in you, transforming you into the image of His Son. And if you have never trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of you sin, yet you feel its weight in your life, that is the Holy Spirit convicting you of your guilt. You can be rid of that burden here and now by trusting Christ for your salvation. He will remove your burden and cleanse your soul.

Next, Peter directs our attention to a specific effect that our purification from sin should have on us. Salvation should cause us to love other Christians. This effect is listed in two ways. First it is the reason we purify our souls. We do this *for a sincere love of the brethren.* We lay aside sin so that we are better positioned to love the brethren. This sentiment is repeated as a command to *fervently love one another from the heart.*

 Notice several aspects of the love we are called to. First, it is a specific love for God’s people. Yes, we are to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us (Mt. 5:43); but there is a different kind of love we are to have towards God’s people. Jesus said that His people are marked by their love for one another. *By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another* (Jn. 13:35). In 1 John we are taught that we can gauge our love for God by our love for one another. 1 John 4:7ff says

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has beheld God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.

We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

These are some strong words. There is a tradition that says when John was an old man, they would carry him to Sunday services. And at the end of each service, out of respect for the aged apostle, they would ask him if he had anything to say. He would always reply *love one another.* After this had gone on for some time, one of the younger men asked, *do you have any other message for us?* To this the aged apostle replied *learn to do this, then I will give you something else.* God’s people are to have an unflinching commitment to one another. This love is not based upon a person’s lovability; it is rooted in the fact that they are one of God’s children. Because we love God, we love what God loves.

 The text describes this love in three ways. First, it is to be a sincere love. This means it is a genuine affection and true commitment. I cringe when I hear people say things like *God and I are fine. It His people that I do not like.* Or *church would be great if it weren’t for the people.* God’s heart is for His people, so our heart should be too. This isn’t a conjured-up love. It is a genuine love that fuels our commitment to the church no matter how much it may struggle or how often we are wounded by other believers. We keep loving them because we love God.

 Second, our love is to be a fervent love. Fervency speaks to passion. It is a love that is alive, compelling us to action. Fervent love is happy to sacrifice your own preferences, desires, and needs for the sake of someone else. It was fervent love that moved the Philippians to give generously to Paul despite their extreme poverty. It was fervent love that kept Paul committed to the broken, disunified, doctrinally unstable church at Corinth, even when they attacked his ministry and character. It is a fervent love that causes persecuted Christians to risk their lives so they can gather with other believers to read and study the word, sing praise to God, pray, and take communion. Fervent love draws us together and moves us to serve one another.

 Finally, this love is to be *from the heart.* It isn’t a fake love that is nice to someone’s face while fostering bitterness towards them internally or slandering them to others. It is a love that flows from the new heart God has given us. Our new heart loves Him and wants to please Him. Yes, our love is reactionary. We love God because He first loved us. But once we have tasted of the kindness of God, we become conduits of His love to others. Because God is love, expressing love should be our heart’s desire.

 Now, demonstrating this love requires effort and sacrifice. God demonstrated His love for us in the greatest sacrifice imaginable: by pouring His wrath on His beloved Son as our substitute. This expression of love was emotionally wrenching for both the Father and the Son. We ought not think that expressing love towards one another will be without sacrifice. Maintaining a happy, loving marriage requires effort. If one or both sides fail to cultivate love, their marriage will not be what it could be. Yet when both parties cultivate a sincere, fervent love flowing from their hearts towards one another, their marriage becomes something beautiful, providing more joy, fulfillment, and comfort that words can describe. The same is true for God’s people. If we neglect love, the church will not be what it could be. But when we cultivate love between brothers, the church becomes a beautiful expression of the gospel as people love, not in word, but in deed and truth.

 The love I have just described is a supernatural love. That means it is not something we can conjure up on our own. Love headlines the list of the fruit of the Spirit, reminding us that love is something God produces in us. Yet many people try to love in their own power. This is what plagued Martin Luther as a young man. He knew he should love and obey God; yet he could never find the peace that he had done enough to earn God’s favor. It was only after he discovered the gospel that he was able to find peace and see progress in his spiritual growth. Mother Teresa is held forward by many as the ultimate example of self-sacrificing love. But what most people do not realize is that her soul was tormented in the same way Luther’s was. At the end of her life, she was asked why she had sacrificed so much for the good of humanity. Her reply was that she hoped she had done enough to earn God’s love. In that moment, she admitted that her lifetime of sacrifice was not a fervent love for God that moved her to compassion for her fellow man. They were acts of self-love designed to manipulate God into loving her. To my knowledge, she died without peace that she was able to make herself acceptable to God.

 My guess is that there are people in this room who approach God like she did…if I go to church, treat people nicely, give some money or time, and show compassion to others, I can earn God’s love. Yet you find yourself not able to make any real progress in your spiritual life, and on the inside, you are bitter towards God or His people. The love described here is far from you. That is because we cannot produce it. It is a supernatural love born out of salvation.

 Before we can love supernaturally, we need God to do the supernatural work of the new birth in us. That is where Peter goes in vs. 23. We love like this because we have been born again. We saw back in 1:3 that God caused us to be born again to a living hope. When we studied that, I referenced John 3, where Jesus teaches us that the new birth is something the Spirit does within us. This miracle is what awakens faith and repentance in us, changing our spiritual condition from death to life, transforming our disposition towards God from enemy to child. This change enables us to sincerely and fervently love one another from the heart. Without this change, all efforts to love are superficial and ingenuine.

 Do you struggle to lay aside sin and love one another? Then ask yourself if you have truly experienced the new birth. Or are you trying to add your works to the work of Christ as a co-participant in your salvation? Like Mother Teresa, are you busy striving for salvation when you should be resting in Christ? If you have been born again, then let us cultivate the life we have received from Christ by killing sin and demonstrating love. Yet success in both of those areas requires the Spirit’s help. This is the incredible thing about the new birth. The Spirit works this miracle in us. Having caused us to be born again to a living hope, He then takes up residency in us to convict and purify us of sin and to enable us to truly love from the heart. The agent He uses to accomplish His work is the word of God. To that subject, we will return next week.