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Series: *Faith for Tough Times*

Title: *The Difference Making Difference*

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Scripture: 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:22-2:12

**1 Peter 1:22 - Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.**

**23 - For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God.**

**24 - For, "All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall,**

**25 - but the Word of the Lord endures forever."**

**2:1 - Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.**

**2 - Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation,**

**3 - now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.**

**4 - As you come to Him, the Living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to Him—**

**5 - you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.**

**6 - For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious Cornerstone, and the one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame."**

**7 - Now to you who believe, this Stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The Stone the builders rejected has become the Cornerstone,"**

**8 - and, "A Stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.**

**9 - But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him Who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.**

**10 - Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.**

**11 - Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.**

**12 - Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us.**

While I was in seminary, I served on the staff of Culbertson Avenue Baptist Church in New Albany, Indiana. The building where the church met was a "U-shaped" combination of three buildings that had been built at different times; a house that served as the office, an educational wing, and a sanctuary, all linked together with a combination of hallway-like tunnels and stairs. It was a good, solid building, but it was an impediment to the church's numerical growth for several reasons.

- First, there was almost no parking. We had one small lot that would hold about 30 cars. If you weren't one of the first 30 to arrive, you had to find street parking.
- Second, you could not enter the building or get to another level without going up or down steep stairs. This of course caused a problem for the elderly people in our congregation. We thought about installing an elevator, but try as we might we could not find a place to put one that would link all the various levels.
- Third, there was no room to grow; the building was land-locked and had zero visibility from the main roads.

So, after a lot of prayer the pastor at the time, Charlie Shields, led the church to move. We bought land a few miles away on the spur that by-passes New Albany and built there. We sold our building to a man who made it into apartments for adults with mental challenges. By the way, he put the elevator shaft where the baptistry was located; which might have worked for the Methodists, but not Baptists.

Now, moving our congregation from the old building to the new was a long process.

- We bought the land.
- It took a couple years to sell the old building.
- Then there were many more months spend in raising funds, finding a contractor, getting building permits, etc.

During this time, the congregation had to move into a school. The old building had a pipe organ, it's the only church I've been in that had one. The congregation hired a special contractor to remove it, store it for about two years and then re-install it in the new building. And as you can imagine, there was lots of furniture to store. In short, it was a long, hard, challenge-filled process, but the church stayed united through all of it. In fact, it continued to grow and the last time I was there they were actually in need of more space in their NEW location.

I thought of this as I studied today's text because as you just heard, Peter compares us as Christians to a BUILDING. In verses 4-8 he says that we are, *"...like living STONES---being BUILT into a spiritual house..."* a house where Jesus is the *"Cornerstone."* If you're wondering where Peter got this word picture, think back to that day at Caesarea Philippi where he had the faith to say Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah of God. What did our Lord say in response? Right, *"On this ROCK---on THIS FAITH---I will BUILD My church."* (Matthew 16:18) Do you remember the NEXT thing Jesus said that day up in Caesarea? Referring to the church He was building He said, *"the Gates of Hell will not prevail against it."* (Matthew 16)

Now, understand, you can't say that about any other institution. I don't mean to scare you; but your bank won't be here forever, your school won't last until the end of time, nations, even the Good ole U. S. of A. will not last forever, but the church will.

I've heard people say they think this pandemic will kill the church. They have said, people will get tired of live-streaming and in essence change the channel and drift away. They say this virus will scare Christians such that they will isolate and no longer act as Jesus' hands and feet.

Nope, that's not going to happen. NOTHING will stop the church from doing what Jesus founded it to do, not viruses, not governments, not even the gates of Hell. Now, why is this true? What is the secret of the church's invulnerability? What has held this "building" made of living bricks together the past two thousand years? In our text Peter gives us the answer and we should pay attention as we face our own trying times. These principles will keep our church together even when this virus separates us.

**(1) First, he says that we Christians---we bricks---love each other with the same LOVE.**

Look at verse 22 of chapter 1: *"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart."*

When we obey God, we don't follow our inner urges or our culture's leading and that faithful obedience cleanses us of prejudices, pride, grudges and bitterness. And cleansing, frees us to love without hypocrisy, to sincerely LOVE each other in spite of our differences, in spite of our flaws.

Note Peter's exact wording. He says, ***"you have a sincere LOVE for each other...you LOVE one another deeply from the heart."*** Does it sound like Peter is repeating himself? I mean he uses the word "love" twice! Well, actually there is no repetition because Peter is using TWO different words; two different kinds of love that combine to make the mortar between our bricks so strong.

I remember our first mission trip to Kenya back in 2002. Our construction team build a concrete wall around the *Amani ya Juu* compound. It involved concrete slabs that we "glued" together with mortar. Making that mortar required TWO things, this powdery stuff in bags and water. When these two things were mixed together, they formed an unbreakable bond. Peter says that's the way it is with our love. It takes a mixture of two types of love, *"phileo"* or brotherly love and *"agape,"* a sacrificial, unconditional love. This hybrid caliber of love empowers us to stick together. Warren Wiersbe says, *"We share brotherly love because we are brothers and sisters in Christ and have likenesses. We share agape love because we belong to God and therefore can overlook differences."* This love is empowered by Jesus, with His help we love each other with a love that will not let go.

A couple verses come to mind:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 8:1 says, ***"Knowledge puffs up but LOVE builds up."***
- And Ephesians 4:15ff where Paul says, ***"Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of Him Who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and BUILDS ITSELF UP IN LOVE, as each part does its work."***

Lee Iacocca once asked legendary football coach Vince Lombardi what it took to make a winning team. Lombardi said, *"There are a lot of coaches with good ball clubs who know the fundamentals and have plenty of discipline but still don't win the game. Then you come to the third ingredient: if you're going to play together as a team, you've got to care for one another."*

*You've got to love each other. Each player has to be thinking about the next guy and saying to himself: 'If I don't block that man, Paul is going to get his legs broken. I have to do my job well in order that he can do his.' The difference between mediocrity and greatness, is the feeling these guys have for each other."*

In the healthy church, each Christian learns to care for others. As we take seriously Jesus' command to "love one another," we contribute to a winning team. Let me just stop and ask, is there a church member or two or three you have not seen in a Zoom meeting or in church these past four months? Then call them! Strengthen the MORTAR here at Redland by letting them know you miss them and love them!

Here's a second thing Peter says unites us:

## **(2) We all have the same FATHER.**

Look at verse 23. ***"For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God."*** In verse 10 he says, ***"Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."***

Peter is saying another thing that keeps us one is the fact that we are related, we have the same Spiritual Father.

These days there is a lot being done with human DNA. Law enforcement is using it to solve cold cases. Attorneys are using it to free people who have been wrongly imprisoned. And adopted children are using it to find their birth father. DNA can prove their physical parentage. When these people are reunited they rejoice

at physical similarities; like this man Frank Billingsley when he first met his biological father, Phil Shapiro. I mean, looking at these two, it's easy to see they are related.

Well, Peter says, as Christians we share a SPIRITUAL DNA and when we get to know other believers, we see those spiritual similarities. This realization has hit me most on mission trips. As I listened to the women of *Amani ya Juu* in Nairobi sing during their devotions, I think, *"They are singing about my Heavenly Father---OUR Heavenly Father."* When I work alongside someone building a church in Saltillo, Mexico, the more we talk about our faith the more I realize, *"Hey this guy is my brother!"* Working with Pastor Carlos in the DR all those years, it leaves no doubt we have the same Father God. Peter is saying this spiritual parentage that we share is a powerful uniting force in the church.

It's like that old Russ Taft song. The lyrics go like this:

*I don't care what label you may wear  
if you believe in Jesus you belong with me  
The bond we share is all I care to see  
And we can change this world forever  
if you will join with me  
Join and sing, sing*

*You're my brother, you're my sister  
So take me by the hand  
Together we will work until He comes  
There's no foe that can defeat us  
When we're walking side by side  
As long as there is love  
We will stand*

We ARE brothers and sisters AMEN?

Here's a third thing that unites us.

### **(3) We take our instructions for life from the same SOURCE.**

Our guidebook for life is the Bible, God's unchanging Word. As Peter says, ***"All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of the Lord endures forever."*** (vs 24-25)

We live our lives by following the same infallible instruction manual. And doing that not only keeps our "building" together, it adds additions to the church building Jesus is constructing. Living rightly GROWS the church. Do you remember the story of how NASA lost a 125-million Mars Climate Orbiter satellite because some engineers were using the metric system and others were using inches and pounds?

One secret to the staying power of the church of Jesus is that we live by the same standards. We "measure life" in the same way; according to the written instructions given us by our Creator.

As Peter says in verses 11 and 12 we ***"abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us."***

And we win the right to share the gospel by the way we live. You know many people say that Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire because of Constantine's declaration in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. But there is more to it than that. The Christians who read Peter's letter did what he said to do. They lived holy lives. Their instruction manual for life was God's Word. So, Christian husbands and wives were faithful to each other. They avoided divorce.

Women were treated with dignity and respect. When the world abandoned girl babies because they were not as valued, the Christians would find them in the forest or on the seashore and bring them into their homes and raise them as their own. This eventually led to more females being IN the church than outside of it. As a result of that, single men in the Roman empire started coming to church. And not only did they find wives, they found Jesus.

When the plagues hit the cities, the standard public health approach was to leave town, even if you left the disabled, your children, the elderly behind. The Christians, at risk and loss of their own lives, would stay behind and take care of those that were abandoned. They would feed them; they would love them and lead them to Jesus. When people came back to the cities, it was the Christians who offered them places to stay and helped them find jobs. They lived constantly in a holy manner that was astonishingly transforming. And this caused Christianity to grow; it brought more and more "bricks" to the building. How many bricks?

Well, we know that because of Pentecost in A.D. 40 there were about 3,000 Christians in the Roman Empire. But by living consistent and godly lives their numbers increased. One hundred sixty years later in the year A.D. 200 there were 218,000 Christians in the Roman Empire. By the year A.D. 350 there were 33.9 million Christians in the Roman Empire, representing 56.5 percent of the population. It was not Constantine that changed the empire to become Christian.

It was holy living over centuries that changed the empire, and it was Constantine who recognized what the Spirit of God had done through the church of Jesus Christ. How did they do it? They did what Peter said to do in hard times. They lived holy lives. As aliens and strangers in the world they abstained from sinful desires and lived such good lives among the pagans, that though they were accused of doing wrong, the pagans saw their good deeds and glorified God.

This principle of unity and growth still works.

This week I read an article by *Open Door Ministry*, that says that in the mid-1990's the Chinese government officials became so fed up with sky-high rates of crime, drug addiction, and sickness in the county of Lanchow, Yunnan province, that they turned for help to the only model citizens in the area: the Christians. One official who did not want to be named confessed, *"We had to admit that the Lahu people were a dead loss because of their addiction to opium. Their addiction made them weak and sick. Then they would go to one of their 'priests,' who required animal sacrifices of such extravagance that the people became poor. And because they were so poor, they stole from each other, and law and order deteriorated. It was a vicious cycle that no amount of government propaganda could break. We noticed, however, that in some villages in the county, the Lahu were prosperous and peace loving. There was no drug problem, or any stealing or social order problems. Households had a plentiful supply of pigs, oxen, and chickens. So, we commissioned a survey to find out why these villages were different. To our astonishment and embarrassment, we discovered the key factor was that these villages had a majority of Christians."*

Officials launched a daring experiment in 1998, the likes of which would have been unthinkable in China 10 years previous. They sponsored Christians to go into the troublesome villages and share their faith. They started by picking out the worst village, which had 240 people, 107 of which were hopelessly addicted to

opium. Christian Lahus were bussed into the village at government expense, and the villagers were herded together by the police and made to listen to the testimonies of the Christians. A year later, there were 17 converts in the village, and they began to grow rich because they stopped spending money on drugs. Eight of the 17 converts even had enough to own sewing machines and start small businesses. By early 2002, 83 of the villagers were Christians and the prosperity had spread. The government official said, *“We are delighted with the results and have been extending the tactic to many other villages since then.”*

Let's pray.