

Love Born from Above
1 Peter 1:22-25

The other day I was pulling weeds around my house, a task which sometimes feels as tedious as it does useless in these parts. I had let the grass around my mailbox get rather out of control, to the point that it was growing up almost as tall as the mailbox itself. I know there is a very simple fix to such a problem, something known as a weedwhacker. Unfortunately, after 2 and a half years of living here, somehow, I still haven't gotten around to purchasing a weedwhacker. So, as I stood there looking at this overgrown grass around my mailbox without the proper tool to remedy the situation, I thought about what else I could do to rectify the problem. In my genius, the idea popped in my head to just go ahead and pull up the grass myself. Surely, it couldn't be that hard, I figured. So, with gloveless hands, I approached the menacing greenery as tall as my 5-year-old daughter, and took a large bundle of it into my mighty grip. I sturdied myself in the squatting position, and began to pull with all the might I could muster in my rather limited muscular frame. I pulled for about 3 seconds before it dawned on me that I was up against a foe far too mighty for me. I quickly realized what a fool I had been to even think I had the strength to uproot that grass that had grown with my bare hands. After looking around to make sure no one had seen my utter failure, I walked back to the shed with my head hung low, and got some clippers.

Here's the lesson I learned. I legitimately thought I could pull up that grass, but I was dead wrong. I think we all have a tendency to overestimate our own ability to perform in this life. We often think there are things that we can do that we just flat-out can't do on our own. We like to be self-sufficient and to think of ourselves as not needing help or assistance in any area of our lives. But self-sufficiency is a myth. It is an illusion of our own grandeur. No human being is capable of being 100% self-sufficient. Which brings us to our text for tonight.

We've been studying the book of 1 Peter the last several weeks, and we have seen how Peter has been giving these 1st Century Christians reminders of the truth that will make them strong. He is writing to exiles, or sojourners, who are experiencing the hardship of persecution in this world. They are even facing the threat of losing their lives because they follow Jesus Christ. He has been trying to ground their faith in the unchanging, rock-solid facts about what God has done in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. The last couple weeks, Peter has moved into a more practical realm of teaching. The beginning of the letter, verses 1-12, focused almost entirely on the truth concerning what God has done. Then, in verse 13, Peter used a very important word, "Therefore," to introduce a shift into the practical realm. He said in verse 13,

¹³ Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:13)

You see how the practical exhortations began with an appeal to their minds? It began with an appeal to being reasonable and thinking clearly and accurately based on the Truth that had now been delivered to them about the salvation that was theirs in Christ Jesus. This is the first appeal of the gospel. Think soberly. Think truly. Think with a readiness to act in accordance with what

you now have as a result of your salvation. Have a true view of yourself and of your place in this world based on what God has done and ultimately will do for you.

Then, in verses 14 through 21, he appealed to the hearts of his readers. He told them they should view themselves in their relationship with God as obedient children. Don't miss the simple significance of that title. Again, this is an appeal to our hearts. What does a child need most in order to obey his or her father? A child needs to know that his father loves him and has the wisdom to know what is best for him. That is what Peter is saying we have as a result of the truth that we believe concerning Christ Jesus. That's what Paul meant when he said, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32) Because of Jesus Christ, we know that our Father in heaven loves us with an unrelenting love and that He knows what is best for us, and has provided what is best for us in His only-begotten Son.

So, Peter appeals to the hearts of believers by reminding them of the familial love with which they have been loved. They are to view themselves as obedient children, who are now holy even as their Father in heaven is holy. Then, Peter took the time to carefully explain the way in which God did this for them. That was verses 18-21.

It was the blood of Jesus that made them obedient children. There is no other way to become an obedient child of God than to be ransomed with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. That was where we left off last week. Jesus was made manifest, He came into this world and accomplished the will of the Father, so that we who through Him are believers in God might have faith and hope in God, and not in ourselves.

Ok, now, are we ready to dive in to what Peter says next? Having received the appeals to our minds and our hearts, Peter is now going to supply the appeal to our wills. This is where Peter clearly states what we must do now. Thank the Lord that His Word not only speaks to our minds and hearts, but it speaks with perfect clarity to our wills. God wants us to know precisely how we should live in this world. Do you want to know how you should conduct yourself in this world, here it is:

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, (1 Peter 1:22)

Stop for just a moment. You just heard a very clear command from the Word of God. That's a sobering thought. This is God's clear requirement for your life. Be careful not to just read over it too lightly or flippantly. Don't just hear this as if it is easy. As you hear this command, understand that on your own, you are like I was trying to pull up that overgrown grass around my mailbox with my bare hands. You can't. Don't think that in your flesh, you have the capacity to carry out this commandment. You don't. Jesus called the commandment that we just heard the second greatest commandment, which is equal to the greatest commandment. Remember this encounter he had with the Pharisee, the expert in the law, who tested him.

³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

When Jesus says these two commandments are the greatest in the law, He means more than just the most important. He does mean that, but He also means that they are the highest. If you pictured the law as a mountain, these two would be at the peak. Everything in the law is beneath these. Nothing ascends higher than the love that God commands for Himself and for our neighbors. Every other command in the law hangs beneath these two, and depends upon them.

Think about this. The law’s purpose is not to provide us with rules that we can keep to work our way back to God. It does do that, but we can’t keep it. The law’s purpose is to tell us to stand back. That’s why God told the people not to come near the mountain where the law was given, Mount Sinai. They had to draw back from the mountain in terror. That’s why there was a veil in the Tabernacle according to the law. No one could enter, save one man, the high priest. That’s why the altar stood at the entrance of the Tabernacle. The law’s purpose, Paul tells us, is to stop our mouths. It is to quiet us and to give us the knowledge of sin.

Logically, then, if love is the greatest and highest commandment contained in the law, it is also the furthest thing from my grasp. It is the most unattainable thing for my flesh. If you have never wrestled with your own inability to love God and others, then you are missing the first and most important lesson of the law. If you hear what Peter just told us to do in light of what Christ has done for us, and you don’t feel some deep sense of need for divine assistance, you might just be in a condition of enmity towards God. The carnal mind, which can mean, the mind that thinks in itself it has the ability to please and obey God, is enmity against God.

No, only in obedience to the truth can we love one another earnestly from a pure heart. When Peter says we’ve purified our souls by our obedience to the truth, he is simply summing up all that he had just said in verses 18-21. He’s not really talking about obedience as something purely external here. It involves that, but it goes deeper. This obedience is something internal, an attitude and condition of our heart in light of the truth. This word for obedience could simply be translated as submission, or attentive hearkening. Surrender. It is saying yes to the promises of God that have found their yes in Jesus Christ. In essence, submission to the gospel, the truth, is what purifies your soul for a sincere brotherly love.

I want to pause to point out some important wordplay in the Greek that does not come through very clearly in the English. There are two different words translated as love in this verse. The love Peter speaks of first as sincere brotherly love is an entirely different word from the love he commands of us. We are purified for a sincere brotherly love, which in the Greek is *philadelphian anypokriton*. We are familiar with the word Philadelphia, thanks to the city of brotherly love up north, a place ironically not so renowned for its brotherly love. It is a

compound word in Greek that brings together the words *philos*, which means friendly affection, that bond we feel with a trusted friend, and the word *adelphos*, which means brother. So, this is a family word. It is love that can only be experienced in the context of family. It describes literally the kind of affection and emotional bond we share with siblings. That is a deep bond.

The word *anypokriton* is what we have translated as sincere. It means what it sounds like in English. Unhypocritical, *anypokriton*. It is very much tied with the teaching of Jesus concerning the Pharisees. To whom did He point as examples of hypocrisy? The Pharisees. The lawyers, the experts in the law, who were experts at teaching the law, but not at doing what the law required. Sincere brotherly love means that we don't just slap a fake smile on when we see someone face-to-face and then turn around and immediately begin to bad-mouth them behind their backs. That's the contrast to sincere brotherly love. Sincere brotherly love has no guile. It does not slap a mask on to cover up the true feelings in our hearts. Peter is saying we've been purified so that we can actually have the real thing. We can actually view one another as brothers and sisters in the Lord, and have that truly deep family bond that comes from belonging to the same Father.

Then, out of the purity of our brotherly love, Peter commands us to tap into an even deeper kind of love for one another. In the phrase, "Love one another earnestly" the word for love is *agape*. I'm sure we've all heard that Greek word before. It is always the word used in connection with God's love. Whenever the New Testament speaks of God's love, the authors use this word *agape*. It is something infinitely deeper and higher than *philadelphia*. How can we define this love? Well, that's perhaps the deepest question of all. It's unattainably high, unfathomably deep, immeasurably wide, and unendingly long. There is a way to know something of this love, though. The Scriptures tell us,

¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. (1 John 3:16)

⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

If you want to know what the love of God is, you have to look at the cross. Why? Because God's love is not like our love. He loved us so deeply that He gave us His only Son while we were enemies. He loved us sacrificially. He loved us to the fullest measure. His love has nothing of selfishness in it. It is perfect love. It is holy love. It is a love that would stop at nothing to redeem us, forgive us, and bring us back to Himself.

So, Peter is really working his way upward here, from the lesser to the greater. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we are commanded to have the same kind of love that God has for us for one another. This really is the new commandment, as Jesus described,

³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

Yes, it’s a new commandment, but it’s also an old commandment. As John described it,

⁷ Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. ⁸ At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. ⁹ Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. ¹⁰ Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. (1 John 2:7-10)

The commandment is old in the sense that it has been with us from the beginning. It’s as old as the Old Testament. That’s why Jesus could refer to the greatest commandment in the law, because it was old. The commandment to love one another has always been with humanity. We’ve all known it. We really don’t even need to be taught it. We’re all without excuse with regard to this law. It’s the golden rule. We all have it even inscribed on our conscience, so that when we don’t love as God loves us, we feel it. We know when we’ve missed this mark. But the more we miss it without confessing, the more our conscience gets seared so that we don’t feel the effects of our failure to love as deeply as we did before. It’s an old commandment.

But it’s also new because of Jesus Christ. It’s new in Him in that He has fulfilled it. He has manifested the love of God to us. It is true in Him, meaning Jesus really did love us earnestly. Here’s the most astounding thing, though: it’s true in you, meaning because He loved you, you really can and do have the ability through Him to love like He’s loved. Whoa! Take a moment and marvel at that statement. John was saying you really can love with the same holy love of the Father. What was old, what nobody could do apart from Christ, is now new; it is true; it is now a reality in our lives through Jesus Christ.

Ok, so that begs the question. How? How did Jesus Christ make this possible? Well, Peter has already given us the answer. He’s been working his way up to this command from the beginning. The answer is all he’s already said up to this point. It is what we’ve believed. It is by the precious blood of Jesus Christ that has ransomed us from the futile ways of our forefathers. (vv. 18-21) It is by causing us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (v. 3) But just in case we are still struggling to grasp the how, Peter again clarifies it for us.

since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for

“All flesh is like grass
And all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers,

And the flower falls,
But the word of the Lord remains forever.”

And this word is the good news that was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:23-25)

There you have the necessity of the new birth. The whole phrase “since you have been born again” is really just one word in the Greek, *anagegennēménoi*. It is in the perfect participle tense, which means that it is a past event which continues to have effects in the present. As an example, let’s say you ate a jar of mayonnaise for dinner and washed it down with a half-gallon of milk. In all likelihood, you might find yourself saying something like this in the middle of the night, “I am feeling very sick to my stomach, having eaten a jar of mayonnaise and drunk a half-gallon of milk.” That is the perfect participle. The feelings of nausea and indigestion were caused by your poor dinner planning.

So, in the context of our passage, the love, the *agape*, which Peter is seeking to stir up in his readers, is understood to be the result of this very definite past event that is the start of the Christian life of every believer. The implication here is that without having been born again, you cannot love one another earnestly. That begs the question, why? Why is new birth essential to practicing *agape* love?

First, it is because of the corrupted nature of our flesh. Peter said, “not of perishable seed.” What is he talking about there? He is referring to our natural birth. This is the fact of original sin. Because we are descended from Adam, we have all been born of perishable or corruptible seed. This is an inescapable fact of life. It is scientifically evident that our bodies are perishing. We are outwardly wasting away as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4. We were all born under sin. We were born of corruptible seed, and we all know this in experience. We all have done things that are corrupting. From the first moment when the law came alive to us, sin came alive with it.

Paul realized this most profoundly in connection with the 10th Commandment, “You shall not covet.” What is coveting? It is essentially the opposite of *agape*. Covetousness is what drove Cain to slay Abel. Covetousness is the desire to have mastery over others rather than the desire to lay your life down for them. Paul said that the first time he understood the command not to covet was also the first time he truly became covetous. The law was not corrupt; it is good, and holy, and just, but Paul was corrupt, and through his inner corruption the law. This is because we are born of corruptible seed. I think Frederic Bastiat, a French economist and philosopher who was born the year after the French Revolution ended, captured well how we twist the law and end up using it for corrupt purposes. Listen to this, written in 1850,



The law has been used to destroy its own objective: It has been applied to annihilating the justice that it was supposed to maintain; to limiting and destroying rights which its real purpose was to respect. The law has placed the collective force at the disposal of the unscrupulous who wish, without risk, to exploit the person, liberty, and property of others. It has converted plunder into a right, in order to protect plunder. And it has converted lawful defense into a crime, in order to punish lawful defense. (Frédéric Bastiat)

Is that not exactly what we see happening in our own justice system. We should not be surprised in light of the biblical teaching. This is how our flesh uses the law. The law offers life, but sin seizes an opportunity through the commandment to bring about death rather than life. That is the result of being born of a corruptible seed. So, we need to be born again if we ever want to uphold the law.

The first reason we need to be born again is because we are born of perishable seed. The second is because love comes from God. Here's a parallel verse to 1 Peter 1:22 in 1 John,

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7)

See how both John and Peter grasped that our ability to love comes from God, and can only be given to those who have been born again? They know the new birth is what has made obedience to this highest command possible.

The last question, then, is how can we be born again, born from above? Through the imperishable seed, the living and abiding word of God, which is the good news that has been preached to you. Peter threw in a quotation from the Old Testament, not just haphazardly. These Apostles never quoted Scripture lightly or glibly. They always had very good reason for quoting an Old Testament text. Isaiah 40, is a chapter about good news. It is always helpful whenever you see a quotation from the Old Testament in the New Testament to go back to that passage and read it in its full and original context. So, let me read the verses that precede and immediately follow the verses Peter quotes here.

³ A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

⁶ A voice says, “Cry!”
And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the Lord blows on it;
surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹ Go on up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Behold your God!”

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.

(Isaiah 40:3-11)

With that fuller view of the text Peter had in mind, we can see that Peter wants us to understand how Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of this prophecy. Peter is saying, now that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, what we have declared to you about Him is the word of the Lord that will stand forever. It is the good news that is now proclaimed. He is saying, “Behold your God!” Behold, Jesus is living and abiding today as the Great Shepherd of His sheep. He is the

great revelation of the glory of the Lord, that all flesh can now see together, not with our physical eyes, but through the faith that comes from hearing the word of Christ.

That is the source of our regeneration. Faith in the word of Christ. The channel through which the life of God pours into your soul is faith in this good news that has been preached. It is as simple and profound as that. Peter says, this word that lives and abides forever, which the prophet Isaiah foretold, and which now I am proclaiming to you, is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the announcement of what Jesus Christ has done once-for-all in the flesh. His flesh was incorruptible. He was born once-for-all, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, through the power of the Holy Spirit in the virgin's womb. He died once-for-all, not for His own sin, but for the sins of the world. He was raised once-for-all, as the firstborn from among the dead, so that we might share in His resurrection. We who are perishing now know that although our bodies will be sown perishable in death, they will be raised imperishable through Him.

Here's how John put it in John 1,

¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)

Jesus is the only one who can give you the new life from God that you need in order to love in the same way He has loved you.

So, here's the take-home point: Don't try to do this on your own. This love is too great for your corruptible flesh. Receive Christ, believe on His name, and you will be given the right, which really means authority, to become a child of God. Today, through faith in Christ, God Himself gives you authority to be His child, born again not of perishable seed but of imperishable. Because of that, you can now love as He has loved you. Every day, you can awake with the dawn in remembrance of the living and abiding word that has been preached to you. That, and that alone, can make your heart of stone a heart of flesh, making you a vessel of the love of God. We love in remembrance of the one who first loved us. Or even more simply and clearly, as John put it, **¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19)** There is no other way for those of us who are born of perishable seed to have a share in the pure, sincere, and earnest love of God.

This means that we never graduate from our need to hear the gospel. We don't believe the gospel at the first and then move on into good works. No, we remain in the soil of the gospel, and out of that soil our good works grow. We are planted in the soil of the message that says, "Jesus paid it all!" The highest command of all, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, is only made possible by the gospel. Our love and good deeds are fruit of the Holy Spirit. Our mindset, our attitude is the result of the gospel. Our love for God and for one another is the result of the gospel. And all the actions that flow out of that love are the result of the gospel. Do you want to overcome temptation and find joy in your obedience to Christ? Preach the gospel to yourself. Let it abide in you. Remain in Jesus, and you will find that love, the highest love of all, begins to flow out of the gratitude that you feel toward Him for what He did for you.

