



1 Peter 1:22-25

Love Sincerely

October 10, 2021

We are going to 1 Peter 1 today.

When we talked about the background of this book, we said that Peter was writing to people who were on the outs with the Roman Empire where they were scattered. They were already distrusted, many of them had already lost land and property, many of their families despised them for these beliefs they held.

And it was only heating up. Soon they'd be blamed for burning Rome, and within a century the false accusations against them would only grow, and even got to the place where people said that Christians were eating babies when they gathered together and accused them of all kinds of cultic practices.

So these Christians receiving this letter are people under pressure.

And in the last year, we've seen what people under pressure do. When people perceive that their resources are running out, that they could be harmed by what's going on around them, they don't usually react well. They attack each other, they devour one another. They spread lies and rumors about one another. They exaggerate the wrongs done against them and avenge them. They envy one another. They feel justified in deceiving one another and slandering one another.

Life turns into an episode of Survivor where anything goes so you can win. When people are afraid and their future is uncertain, community is ruptured and it's replaced with a dog-eat dog, survival of the fittest, darwinian society where everyone is doing whatever they think is necessary to be at the top.

So Peter writes to these people under pressure because he knows it was possible for them not to respond that way. Remember that Peter knew Jesus. And soon in chapter 2 he'll remind them how Jesus responded under pressure:

1 Peter 2:22-23 “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.”

So Peter is writing to these people to help them be holy as Christ is holy. To help them suffer more like Christ and less like everybody else when they're under pressure.

And the applications to us will be obvious. In these pandemic years, I don't know that church people at large have suffered much better than those around us. We've slandered one another, divided from one another, spread lies and rumors about one another, panicked in the same ways, behaved with malice toward one another. Which is evidence that we've forgotten or never really understood what Peter is about to say to us here, because within these truths are the resources to be a holy and distinct people, even under pressure.

1 Peter 1:22 Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, 23 since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; 24 for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, 25 but the word of the Lord remains forever."And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

So he starts verse 22 by saying “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth...”

In previous verses, Peter wrote about Christians believing the gospel and being made a holy people, because all heart change begins by acknowledging the supremacy of God and submitting to His will for us. And he says now you are a distinct people, an obedient people.

And “Now that you're a distinct and holy people, love one another.”

As Christians, we want to live holy lives. But we tend to think that living a holy life means we aren't committing big sins - we are avoiding sins of commission. A holy person doesn't violate the ten commandments. They don't lie or steal, they don't commit sexual sins. They keep themselves free from those kinds of things.

But we can easily forget about sins of omission. We forget about the good things we fail to do and the things we leave undone.

And the greatest thing we can easily ignore in our quest for holiness is love for one another. But he says there is no being holy without a sincere brotherly love. This is a major emphasis in the New Testament.

It was a big emphasis for Jesus:

John 13:34 “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.”

It was big for the apostle Paul:

1 Corinthians 13:13 “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

John wrote:

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

And Peter says it in today’s passage, and then he will circle back around to this in **1 Peter 4:7-8 where he’ll say, “above all, keep loving one another...”**

Individual holiness of life is good and something we should all be pursuing. But if sincere love for Christians is not a central part of that holiness, it is incomplete and it isn’t a holy life.

Let’s beware of thinking we are living holy lives just because we are standing up against some sins.

Holiness includes things we stand against. And it also includes standing with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

There are too many of us who are great at taking stands, great at refusing to compromise on our doctrines or principles, but also can’t maintain real Christian relationships.

If we keep ourselves relatively clean but aren't actively practicing sincere love for Christians, we aren't holy.

But how do you get to sincere brotherly love?

Love is not just a feeling, but it is active, it does things. Love serves others, it is generous with others, it prefers others before itself. It's active.

Our culture treats love as something that comes upon you, something that hits you, something we fall into. But biblical love is much more volitional than that.

Or our culture will treat love as only a feeling - I feel good when I am with you and that's love. Biblical love includes the feelings but goes far beyond feelings.

At the risk of a wedding breaking out, let me just read a portion of 1 Corinthians 13:

1 Corinthians 13:1 "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends..."

There's an awful lot of action listed there. So someone who is loving does some specific things: they are patient with people. They are kind. They're not in competition with others, always envying or boasting. They don't have to have things their way. They interpret the words of others charitably, believing all things - believing the best about others. They are hopeful, and just keep enduring the hardships of relationships - they bear all things. Love actively does those things.

If our picture of holiness is just of a person with lots of self-control who doesn't fail morally, it's incomplete. There is no holiness without active love for one another.

Peter says to practice all of that. But he says even more than that in verse 22:

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

We're called to love with sincerity, and with earnestness.

Feel the weight of that. We are called to do all the things that love does. And we are called *to mean it*. To do it with sincerity.

In our own strength, we can muster up many of the things that love does - we can force ourselves not to insist on our own way, we can stomp down resentment, we can hide our irritability. We choke down the complaints that we want to spew out.

So we could get ourselves to love outwardly, but the whole experience will feel like swallowing our own vomit and choking back what we really want to do. But that's not sincere love - it is behaving lovingly outwardly while our hearts are unchanged.

And it isn't that we shouldn't do loving things when we don't feel like it, we should. We should do the patient things when we don't feel patient, we should not act out of envy even when we're green with it on the inside. So don't hear me saying that if we don't feel sincere love we shouldn't act in love.

But we will never be able to keep up insincere love. We'll eventually revert to the mean and do what comes from within. If our love is just "Weekend at Bernie's" love, propping up a dead thing to make it look alive, the charade will come to an end.

Or, our behavior will morph into resentment and bitterness because we are acting against everything in us.

And when our love is always insincere, it reveals a failure of belief down inside us somewhere.

So Peter gives us a couple of reasons for us to believe sincere love is possible, and each of them can serve as a resource to feed our souls so we can love others. They're the power of the new birth and the power of God's word. Look at verses 23 and 24 again:

23 since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; 24 for "All flesh is like grass and all its

glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, 25 but the word of the Lord remains forever."And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

1) The power of the new birth

Christians are people who have been “born again.” This means that when we came to believe in Christ we received forgiveness of our sins and a right relationship with God on the outside, but also new hearts that are inclined toward God and his commands.

And that makes a difference. He says “since you have been born again...love.”

When we become Christians, we become people who are far more capable of sincere and earnest love than we were before.

To come to faith in Christ is to recognize our sin and our need, to believe that Jesus met that need by dying on the cross, and to respond with repentance and trust. And that doesn’t come naturally. Faith is a gift from God. So to really come to know Jesus is a supernatural event. It may not feel that way, but it is that.

And at that moment of faith, we experience the new birth - we have new desires, and affections, a heart more sensitive to conviction of sin, more humility, and more ability for obedience.

And Peter says, “Since you’ve experienced that, love sincerely and earnestly.” There’s a totally different way of living that is a possibility.

Between the internal change that comes from knowing Christ and the practice of looking to the gospel for our resources to live differently, there’s huge potential for really extraordinary earnest and sincere love.

What I mean is that when we’re aware of what happened to us to make us Christians, it is going to change how we relate to others.

For example, one obstacle to our loving people is that we will inevitably run into things we need to forgive each other for. We will wrong each other, we will disappoint each other, we won’t live up to expectations, we will say the wrong thing at the wrong time or not say the right thing at the right time.

And we might be tempted to say, “I could never forgive the person who offended me or let me down.”

But then we remember the gospel. We had sinned grievously against God in thoughts and words and deeds. To say that we disappointed Him would be a huge understatement.

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

I needed massive forgiveness, and God in His mercy sent His son to die so I could be forgiven. So remembering that softens my heart so that I can turn around and forgive the wrongs done to me. I can now love much better because of my understanding of the Gospel.

It’s also hard to muster the true patience that characterizes love. People are frustrating and slow to change. Personalities get locked into ruts and we endure some of the same frustration with the same people year after year.

2 Peter 3:9 “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

God has been incredibly patient with me, leading me to repentance. So if I am the one who needs God to be patient with me, I can’t not be patient with others. When I’m impatient, I’ve lost sight of all that God has done for me.

It’s pretty normal among Christians to have very limited patience with people who are where I was five years ago. I know some who can’t even stay at a church with people whose theology is only as developed today as theirs was five years ago. There’s an expectation of patience for me, but my expectation is instant perfection for you. And if you aren’t caught up with me, I have no room for you.

But we have a God who has walked with us through all of our immaturity, stuck with us through our ignorance and sin and unbelief and wrong ideas. And has continued to walk with us. So we look to Him, and find the resources to live like that toward one another.

It's hard to bear all things and be committed to Christians or a church. I see on the internet what these people are like. I could never be part of a people like that. These people are so despicable that it actually hurts my faith to be in the same building with them.

But again, in believing the gospel, I have admitted that I am a person like that. To say I could never find a Christian church I would commit to is to betray an extraordinary amount of arrogance - it's to say I don't believe there is anything problematic about me.

On top of that, believing in Christ makes us part of the family of God.

Ephesians 1:5-6 “he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”

These aren't employees we can fire or co-workers we can ditch when we find another job. They are brothers and sisters (and you get the brothers and sisters you get without choosing them.) God has made us family with these people. And with family, you love people and are committed to people regardless of their performance. It's not that when they behave they become brothers and sisters, that happened when they became Christians.

“Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it.” - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together.

Let's not divorce our thinking from grace, let's not think of church as business, Christians as people who earn my love, and if they're doing it really well, I'll call that Christian brotherhood and really want to be part of it.

These are people that God has called my brothers and sisters. This is why we gather here, but also gather in grow groups and grace groups and smaller groups throughout the week. We need those personal relationships that God made us for:

So in our new birth and in the message of the Gospel there are many of the resources to love.

And the other resource we tap in to when we need the strength to love is the living and abiding word of God:

23 since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; 24 for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, 25 but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

So he contrasts the imperishable with the perishable here.

He says that the seed that was planted in our hearts that grew into our faith is the word of God. And it can't perish.

And like begets like. If you plant apple seeds, you're going to get apple trees. If you plant corn kernels, you'll get corn. If you plant seed that can't perish, what grows out of it can't perish.

And because the seed of our faith was the permanent, imperishable word of God, it grew into us - and we are imperishable.

Think of how this would have landed on someone who heard this in the first century. They are being persecuted by Rome, what many thought was an eternal Empire. Rome had strength and wealth and power, and they have now decided they will put their thumb down on the Christians. So surely false Christians are jumping ship because of the pressure, everyone's afraid, what can this tiny Christian community do in the face of imperishable Rome? So all of the fears and the sense of scarcity would produce a desire to be selfish, to not love, to fend for yourself.

But Paul says "you were born again from imperishable seed." And that seed grew into imperishable you. And sure enough, Rome fell and is no more, but the word of the Lord remains forever.

And the passage that Peter quotes here is Isaiah 40.

Isaiah 40 was written to a people who had lost the land of Israel, had been carried off into exile, but would soon be restored. And they were devastated at all of the losses around them. So Isaiah wrote this - think of how this would sound if you were in exile, away from your place, your people, your temple, very few around you believed in your God, you've experienced huge losses:

Isaiah 40 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 Get you 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. 12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? 13 Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? 14 Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding? 15 Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust. 16 Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor are its beasts enough for a burnt offering. 17 All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness. ...

28 Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. 29 He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. 30 Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; 31 but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah wrote this to people who had lost everything that made them a community to remind them of God's grandeur, God's care, God's purpose for them, God's future for them, the sure thing that God would restore them.

He starts the chapter with "comfort, comfort my people," and reminds them of who God is, how God is for them, how God's word will outlast Babylon and the nations are nothing before Him.

And Peter writes to his own readers that he has called "Elect exiles," people who are dreading what is coming their way, people who are scattered and small and are losing so much, with the mighty and cruel Roman Empire breathing down their necks, and he says, "Remember how trustworthy God has been."

Remember when he told the Jews in captivity that His word would outlast Babylon? Well, it will outlast Rome, too. We have a limitless, imperishable word that we grew out of, so we can't be ultimately defeated.

And remember, he is saying all of this to tell them that they can love one another sincerely. So how does this sense of God's sovereignty and care and purpose and the permanence of his word and our existence feed love?

If you don't believe in God, you have to look at the world around you and believe that you have to fight for your piece of the pie. This is the lifeboat theory - we're all on this lifeboat planet together, and on a lifeboat, there are only so many resources. If you're adrift at sea in a lifeboat and there is only so much water, only so many cans of food, and there are too many of you in the lifeboat, you have to decide who you throw overboard so the rest can survive. So it becomes a fight over who is more valuable, who has more of a claim to the resources around you. So you have to make yourself look important, you have to pretend you're valuable, and you have to fight for that food like you're fighting for your life. Because there is a scarcity of the resources you need to survive, it changes how you act in every way. You can't afford to love.

And if we don't believe there's a God outside our system providing all we need, we tend to look at our lives as lifeboats where resources are limited and we have to fight for them. And the resources we fight for are not just food and water, but everything else that we think we need that is in short supply in the world. We fight to get noticed by people because there is only so much praise and acceptance to go around. We fight to have power over people so we're not the ones thrown overboard at work or in our social

circle. We fight for stuff because there is only so much money to go around. We view the world from a perspective of scarcity.

But then we heard the Gospel and were born again.

Now we meet Christ and we have infinite love and acceptance. We have a God who gave his only son to us, proving that he will withhold nothing that we need - every resource that we truly need for life and godliness and joy is ours. And if we give away our financial and emotional resources, we have this infinite fountain in Christ constantly replenishing. And now we approach people NOT from a perspective of scarcity but from a perspective of abundance.

You don't need to get noticed anymore because you're loved and accepted by Christ. You don't need power and control because you're in the hands of the God who is in control. You even hold to your money more loosely because it is not your money that gives you provision and security, it is God.

And you no longer look at people as objects that you need in any way: to pad your ego, to pad your wallet, to make you complete, to help uphold your image. Every need we had before was fulfilled in Jesus and when we believe in him deeply, we no longer need anything from people.

So we approach people around us from a perspective of abundance, not need.

Which changes our relationships with each other. Because now we can love people unconditionally, serve them unconditionally, truly expecting nothing in return. It makes us better at loving people purely and sincerely, from a pure heart like Peter says.

Since we have been born again, and since we came from that which is imperishable and are imperishable ourselves, we are freed to love from a pure heart, sincerely. And we can't convince ourselves that we have grown in holiness if we haven't seen a growth in love.

> Invitation to the new birth.

>Time of silent confession

> Prayer of Confession, portions adapted from a prayer entitled “Love One Another” on page 236 of Streams of Mercy, a prayer book written by Barbara Duguid.

Father, we confess that we often fail to love as we have been loved by Christ. We become blinded by our own self-righteousness and are great at judging others in spite of having our own records of failure. Father, forgive us.

Jesus, we have received enough forgiveness from you that we should be the most loving and forgiving people on earth. You took our failure and became sin for us so we could be credited with your flawless record of love.

Spirit, help us to repent of our lack of love, our resentment, our lack of forgiveness, and to run to your throne again and again for mercy. Help us to love and forgive with sincerity and a desire to restore, so that we might reflect Christ to those around us. Make us holy people who love sincerely in reflection of Christ.

Discussion Questions for Small Groups:

1. How does sincere and earnest love differ from phony love?
2. How can we obey the command to love sincerely?
3. How does Isaiah 40 apply to Christians today? Why does Peter cite it?
4. Discuss the idea that perceived scarcity reduces our ability to love.

5. How does belief in the truths of the Gospel help us love, as described in 1 Corinthians 13?
6. Why do you think we sometimes settle for “taking stands” as enough holy living, and disregard the commands about love and Christian relationships?