

We continue this morning with our series in 1 Peter called *Thriving in Babylon*. We have been looking at what it means to be an elect exile, what it means to be a follower of Jesus and a citizen of heaven, while living in this world that is no longer our own. Peter's lays the foundation of his letter by telling us of the magnificent salvation we have in Jesus, and then he moves with some specific instructions on how we are to live because of that salvation. His first command was to be holy. Since God is holy, we are to be holy because we belong to him. His second command was to fear God as Father and judge. And this week, we're going to look at the third command, found in 1:22:

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.

Peter turns the conversation from how we live in right relationship with God to how we live in right relationship with each other. God, who is love and who loves us, reshapes our character to his, compelling us and enabling us to love one other. One of the most tangible ways in which we love is to serve one another. Jesus said "I have come not to be served, but to serve." To serve is to love, and to love is to serve. So today we're going to do things a little differently. This month we've been focusing on Serve Your Church, and I want to spend some time this morning giving you the opportunity to hear from some of our ministry leaders, to hear their heart for these ministries and their heart for those they serve, and how we as a church live out this command to love one another and serve each other through them. INTERVIEW

Your salvation compels you to love.

As you just heard from that interview, those leaders love others. They are leading and loving in response to what Christ has done for them.

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.

Peter begins this section by telling us of two aspects of our salvation that compel us to love. The first is that we have been purified. When we responded in faith and obedience to the truth of the Gospel by putting our trust in Jesus, we were washed clean of our sin and made right with God. The word for "purified" has the same root as sanctification (v.2) and holy (v.16). That means you have been chosen by God, set apart, consecrated for his purposes, and no longer a citizen of this kingdom.

The second is that we have been born again. If you remember from last week, I said that you have been saved into a relationship. When we were born again, we were born into a new family, the family of God. That family includes not only a relationship with our Heavenly Father, but also a relationship with the rest of his children; those who have also been chosen by God, set apart by his Spirit, and who are also living as exiles in this kingdom. When the church gathers,

it's a family reunion. That's why we have been set apart for a brotherly love. Part of our calling is to love each other as brothers and sisters as we navigate this world as exiles. Peter uses one of the Greek words for love, Philadelphia, to express this familial relationship we have with one another. By virtue of our relationship in Christ, we are to love one another. We have a bond with each other, and a responsibility to each other, simply because we both belong.

Now, this brotherly love may not seem all that important to us, but remember who Peter is writing this to. These are followers of Jesus who have been ostracized from their families and communities and are starting to experience persecution for their faith. But this isn't a message for just those who lived 2,000 years ago. This week, our Missions Pastor Cheryl Read is heading over to India, a place that is growing ever more hostile to Christianity. She'll be meeting with some pastors we have partnered with there. And, while she'll do some training, she told me the most important thing she'll do is love and encourage them, because their faith and their ministry come at a cost.

I know a little bit about this feeling. I did most of my growing up in Florida and chose to go to a college in Kansas. And while it wasn't a big school, it was unfamiliar, a little intimidating, and when I first got there, I felt like a foreigner and a little out of place. The saving grace was that a friend and teammate of mine from high school also chose to go to that same school. There was great comfort having "one of my own" with me as I navigated this foreign place. For those who are living as exiles in this kingdom, who experience the consequences of being a stranger to this world, there is great comfort and peace in the love of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

So Peter instructs us to love one another, and he characterizes that love in a few ways. First, he moves from using the Greek philo/philadelphia to agape. Agape love is unconditional, given regardless of the performance of the other person. Agape love is self-sacrificing, pouring yourself out without the expectation of anything in return. Agape love has one focus: the wellbeing of the other person. It is the kind of love that should exist between husbands and wives, which is why 1 Corinthians 13 is read so often at weddings. It is the kind of love demonstrated on the Cross. And it's the kind of love with which we are to love our brothers and sisters.

We are to love one another earnestly. Peter uses an athletic term that means "at full stretch" or "in an all-out manner". Love is not reserved for times where it is convenient or easy. As I heard Jerod say this week, "You can't choose who you love. You just have to love whoever God puts in front of you." To love is to extend ourselves with all we have. It should be our default mode. Understand, this is more than mere emotion. It is a perpetual act of selflessness that follows the example of our Lord and Savior, and shows the world that we are his followers.

And this love is eternal, because it is born out of our new eternal nature. Peter says we have been born again by an imperishable seed. It's the same word he used to describe our inheritance in v.4. It is through hearing and responding to the imperishable Word of God, the Gospel, that leads to us putting our faith in Christ. When we do that, we are indwelt with the Holy Spirit and regenerated with a new and eternal life. The change in our identity is eternal. The change in our character is eternal. And the responsibility that comes with that change is love. The love we give

to a brother or sister in Christ is a gift from God and an incredible ministry each of us are called to. So then why is sometimes so hard to love, and what can we do about it?

Your salvation enables you to love. Whatever God calls us to, he makes possible.

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.

Peter lists five vices or sins that we are to avoid. Now, since he's writing to exiles, you might expect the list to include worldly temptations like lust or gluttony or greed or idolatry. But it doesn't. He lists relational sins which are enemies of love and capable of creating division between brothers and sisters in Christ. The family of God is to be a place of unity, so these five sins must be identified and eradicated when they are in our midst. As exiles, we will surely face difficulty with this kingdom, and the Church is to be a safe refuge from that.

There's also an external impact our unity has, which Peter isn't necessarily getting at, but it's important to point out. Our nation, and really our world, is in turmoil. Division is everywhere, and people are picking sides. There is such a need for healing and reconciliation, and the Church has the awesome privilege and responsibility to lead the way and go first. If this worldly kingdom looks at us and sees strife and division, they will conclude we have nothing to offer and will have no interest in being a part of it. But if they see the Church as a place of unity and peace and love, they may just get curious and see what we're all about.

So how do we do this? Peter tells us to put away or take off those five sins. It is an active and conscious removal of these things in our lives. Is this a call to behavior modification? Is this something we just have to try really hard to avoid, striving in our own power? No. Our relationship with God and our relationship with others is inseparable. If you are looking for someone to lose, instead of someone to love, you've got some work to do. Thankfully God helps us in that need.

² Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

We are to take on the humble perspective of a newborn infant. Infants are completely dependent on their parent, helpless on their own. But while they may be completely dependent, babies are also hungry and instinctive. There is, perhaps, no greater force in the world than a hungry baby. When it's time to eat, nothing will stop that baby. And you don't have to teach babies how to eat. They just know. We are to have an insatiable longing for the pure spiritual milk that God provides, and that is his Word.

Notice the milk we are to long for is pure. The word for pure is the antonym of the word for deceit in v1. We should long for all of what God has to say in his Word; even the difficult things. Listen, it would be much easier to sugar coat or skip over the challenging parts of the Bible. In just the last few weeks, Gary and I have preached on holiness, obedience, judgment, and fear. It would be easier for you, and easier for us, to simply preach sermons telling you to be nice. It would also be poisonous. Only the pure spiritual milk of God's Word is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. And that's what we should crave.

And while Peter is certainly referring to the pure spiritual milk of the Word of God, I believe he's talking about more. Mothers these days are encouraged to nurse their babies as soon as they are born. The purpose is two-fold. The first is to get sustenance to the baby as soon as possible. The second, though, is for the sake of connection. When nursing, the baby doesn't just get the sustenance of its mother, the baby gets the mother. When we consume this pure spiritual milk, we not only get the sustenance of God's Word, we get God himself. And God tastes good.

Within the next few weeks there's going to be an annual phenomenon occurring in my home. That phenomenon is known as pumpkin crunch. Pumpkin crunch is the most decadent, delicious, delightful dessert known to mankind...and I'm not even a dessert guy. It has enough butter to clog the arteries of a rhino, and it is a favorite amongst my family. And here's how we usually eat it. Everyone will get a serving when it's first made, but then things change. Each member of my family will casually make their way into the kitchen, grab a fork and take another taste directly from the pan (because it doesn't count if you take it directly from the pan). That will happen around four times per person. You see, once you've had a taste of it, you can't help but go back for more and more.

If we have truly tasted the goodness of God, we can't help but go back for more. As we consume the pure spiritual milk of his Word, and as we encounter the person of God, we grow up into our salvation; we mature in our faith. The more we mature, the more our character takes on God's character, and the more we are enabled to put away those five relational sins and live a life characterized by love. If you want more love in your life, spend more time at the source.

The outpouring of that love is to serve. That's why we are spending three weeks talking about Serve Your Church. Service is about more than having enough people to execute the programs of our church. I've never completely liked the word "volunteer" because that suggests us helping someone else with their thing. Loving and serving one another is the business of the Church. Service is a tangible expression of Christ's love for us, it's an opportunity for the family of God to take care of each other, and it is an incredible way for us to help others taste and see that the Lord is good.