

Part 4: Distinct in Love

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April 26, 2020

Today we resume our series in 1 Peter and the big theme of our study is "Spiritual Refugees." Peter is writing to Christians whom he calls, "elect exiles." That is they are people who belong distinctly to Jesus, but who also live in the world which doesn't look like Jesus.

This assumes a tension, and it's that tension Peter wants to discuss. How are we to act when the distinctions of Christianity are confronted by the world? We are beginning the portion of his letter where he specifically addresses some of those pressure points. And today he is going to make the case, simply put, that Christians are to love one another with a distinct love.

Love which endures in difficult and trying times.

Now our culture loves to talk about love. And to a large degree they rely on the Bible to formulate much of what they think about love. In fact the idea that God is loving, is an idea that is championed exclusively by Christianity. No other religion openly champions a God who reveals himself as a loving God.

So to talk to co-workers or neighbors who want to make a God of their own choosing because, "God is love," they must wrestle with the only God who has claimed to be a loving God, the God of scripture.

But you've also probably heard another Judeo-Christian concept of love which shapes our cultural understanding of love: the golden rule. Look at what Jesus says in **Mark 12:30-31**.

Now in this text we have a primary call to love God, but that is often stripped away to focus on the second command, "Love others as you love yourself." This has led to a phenomenon in our world today called: "self-care." The premise of self-care is this: if we are to love others like we love ourselves, then if we want to love others we must learn to first love ourselves.

If you really want to emotionally and zealously love those around you, you need to love yourself first. Don't over extend yourself. Learn to say no. Or as one popular TV show of the past put it, "Treat Yo' Self."

I imagine that there are people in here today on both sides of this spectrum. Some might hear this and think this to be the most ridiculous idea. But I actually think that this self-care movement has identified a true reality.

Loving other people is costly. And if we want to be emotionally and passionately loving of those around us, we need to make sure our own hearts and bodies are equipped to do so. I think for a long time Christians have been content with an emotionless love that's rooted in stoicism and not scripture.

This is a reaction against that. And while I think the self-care movement has identified a right problem, I think they have the wrong solution.

Today in 1 Peter we are going to see the truth that we do need help with love, and that love does start with the state of our own heart. But neither self-righteousness nor self-care are sufficient to love in the costly way the Bible calls us to. We are going to look at this in two parts today.

First we are going to see how Christians are **Changed by Love** and **Changed for Love**. Peter wants us to first see how Jesus has cared for us in a way which is not only emotional, but effective. After Peter shows us how only Jesus can change us, then he drives home his command to love. If we really want to care for ourselves and love others, we must look first at how Jesus cares for us.

So let me read for us once more our text before we dive in. **1 Peter 1:22-25**.

Central to Peter's letter today is one singular command: "Love one another earnestly." But to give us the care and motivation we need to do so, he surrounds the command to love with the reality of our salvation.

This is our first point today: **Changed by Love**.

Immediately before this portion of scripture Peter sang the wonders of Jesus' work to save us: **1 Peter 1:18-21**.

Why did Jesus come to obey God perfectly, why did Jesus come to die sacrificially, why did Jesus rise eternally? For the sake of you! (Who is the "you"? Those who believe.)

The reason the Triune God set forth to redeem broken sinners was due to God's zeal for his glory. But Paul says in Ephesians 2:4, "But God being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us made us alive together with Christ." In Psalm 69, David cries out as one in need of deliverance and what language does he use to make this request? **Psalm 69:16**, "Answer me, O Lord, for your steadfast love is good; according to your abundant mercy, turn to me."

To be saved by grace through faith is to be lavishly loved by God. It is an awkwardly overwhelming love which should make us blush at its scandal.

Peter is saying to his churches that Jesus' love is unique because his work was unique. It wasn't like that of silver or gold, but that of something beyond our comprehension. No one loves like Jesus because no one is like Jesus.

It is only the love of Jesus which actually changes us because it's only the love of Jesus which solves the problem of sin. Sin has poisoned us against God and against others, but Jesus changes that. Peter points out that change in two places (it purifies us, and makes us born again). First he says that this love has purified us. Look at **1 Peter 1:22**.

Peter here says that this purification has come about, as a past event, because of your obedience to the truth. Now before we move on I want to spend some time here. Peter is not saying here that you are saved based of your ability to obey God's commands. He is saying that you have been saved due to your obedience to the truth.

What is the truth? The truth of all that Jesus did to ransom us, the truth that results in us having faith and hope in God. We are saved by obedience to the gospel.

To be saved by having obedience to the truth communicates two important issues regarding salvation. The first is that it is the truth of what Jesus did to save sinners and restore us to God which saves us. But secondly, there is an aspect of obedience and responsibility that is required of us. When someone declares good news to you, you either believe it or you don't believe it. You either respond to it by celebrating it, or you reject it.

The only obedience which saves us is the obedience of believing that Jesus' work was the only work we needed.

If you're a Christian today, I want to challenge you, do you really believe that? I've talked to lots of people who know they need Jesus' but it's kind of like a 90/10 split. Jesus does 90% of the work, I need to do the next 10%.

But obedience to the gospel means you respond to Jesus doing 100% of the work. Peter's point is that if you discount Jesus' work to save you, you actually discount Jesus' love for you.

To trust in your own works is to keep at arms-length the love of Jesus. And this has ramifications on how you love others. If we trust in our own works to purify us, then our love for others will never fully be pure.

We love others because we are keeping score of our own good. We love others not because we love others but we love the reward that loving others might bring us. Or we refuse to love others because they inevitably might become a threat to my own works. They might, by my love, outperform me.

But to realize that we are saved by faith in the gospel, we have been purified for a sincere brotherly love. We can love others simply because we love them. Why? Because Jesus has loved us simply because he loved us and he loved his Father. The burden of performance is removed, people are not tools or threats to our own salvation. Jesus has taken our hearts which often stink with selfish motivations, and he has cleansed them in his blood.

Salvation purifies our heart to love people sincerely for that's how Christ loved us.

Secondly, God's word has caused us to be born again. **1 Peter 1:23**.

Both verbs Peter uses to be purified and to be born again are verbs that are in the perfect tense. Meaning these events are so perfectly that they change everything which follows. Conversion is not of momentary significance but enduring significance.

You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable seed. We are able to love one another because we have been reborn to love one another in our salvation. And the nature of this conversion, this total transformation is not in accordance with the world, but in accordance with the God himself.

We are born anew as part of God's family which means we now know what that true love looks like because we see it in our Father. It slowly, just as it would for our kids, begins to get played out in our own lives. We are being trained for a distinct love.

Again, this is not because we earned it or petitioned it, this rebirth process is because God's word, has done it. And it's here where Peter turns and quotes Isaiah 40: **1 Peter 1:23-25**.

Now if you've been in the church for a long period of time, this passage is often used to stress the effectiveness and sufficiency of God's scripture. And it's true that Peter certainly wants us to be encouraged by this truth.

But it's not necessarily about scripture. We know this because at the end of the passage he says this "word" which made you new, is the good news, the gospel which was preached to you. I don't think Peter meant this to be primarily a lesson on the sufficiency of scripture as much as it's a lesson on the effectiveness and endurance of the gospel by which we are made new.

In fact the context of Isaiah 40, which Peter quotes, is a song of comfort. God's people had just heard of the judgment which would fall on them because of their sin. But here the prophet holds out the promise of hope, that God's plan for redemption will not fail them even when circumstances seem bleak. His word of hope will outlive the circumstances of hopelessness.

And what does all this have to do with love?

Remember, Peter is writing to churches in exile. Churches who are facing increasing persecution. Churches who perhaps like ourselves have found it difficult to meet together. And he says this, the same eternal word which saves you, is the same eternal word which gives you the continued ability to love even in hard times.

If the root of our love is what Jesus has done for us, and if the hope of what Jesus has done for us never changes, then even in moments of hardship, we rise to love our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Make no mistake, loving people is costly. But if you ever stop to ask yourself the question, "Can I actually love someone during circumstance _____?" The Bible says, "Yes!" Why? Because Jesus has changed you by his own love.

I love the final battle scene in Chronicles of Narnia where Aslan storms the castle of the White Witch where she has kept all the Narninians whom she has turned to stone. And Aslan goes to each of them, and breathes on them, and they come alive. And what do they do when they come alive? They rush to join the battle with their brothers.

Jesus' breath of life awakens us by love for a love we cannot muster on our own. Finding the proper motivation to love is to see how Jesus loved us. Finding the best care for your own soul is to submit yourself to the gospel of a King who cared for you like this.

But because Jesus has cared for us perfectly in himself, we have the infinite ability to love others even if it is acted on by finite people. This is the second point today: **Changed for Love**.

Look back at this text: **1 Peter 1:22-25**.

Why has Jesus saved us? Peter emphasizes on key reason here: for love. That we would love one another earnestly with a pure heart.

Peter is speaking here of believers caring for and loving other believers. This is not romantic love, nor is it love of anyone. He's not saying those aren't important, but what he is saying is love towards your brothers and sisters in Christ should be an immediate result of your salvation.

It is a necessity. Now I must confess. I wrestle with this. I don't necessarily wrestle understanding the command to love. But I do wrestle with making it known that I love my brothers and sisters in Christ.

Every week I work through parts of our membership directory contacting, texting and calling people. And sometimes when on the phone I feel this desire to close the conversation with, "I love you." But I always chicken out. Or I soften it a bit and say, "We love you," as if making it plural decreases the intimacy of it.

But why is it that we wrestle with this so much? Perhaps it is because we have lost sight of what the church is. The church doesn't exist to feed you content and meet your preferences, the church is these one anothers gathered together to worship God and to love one another.

If we personalize the church, we lose the freedom to love. But such love is essential. It must show up for it is tied to the change that Christ has perfectly completed through his love. To show up to church, to go to community group, and to not actively be committed to loving other people is to miss out on one of our primary identities as believers.

And there are two aspects of the necessary love that are important for us to see in this text.

The first is that our *love is rooted in the gospel itself*.

Do you notice the foundation Peter gives our love? We have been purified by faith for sincere love. We have been born again with an eternal word of the gospel so that we might have an earnest and enduring love. The basis for Christian love is not in circumstantial issues, but in the objective truth of the gospel.

This has huge ramifications when it comes to suffering and to discipleship. In times of tension and sorrow, we may want to withdrawal from loving others and instead just focus on ourselves.

But Peter here says that you must move towards others and trust that Christ has cared for you. This doesn't mean that a good cup of coffee and a nice nap are unimportant. But if your ability to love others in difficult times stems from your own ability to create a well of satisfaction, you will never find yourself full. Why? Because we can't even care for ourselves sufficiently.

What hope do you have that in hard times, even when you don't know how to love or what to offer, that you can love others? Because Jesus loved you, and he has filled that cup of affection with his own love.

Self-care isn't pampering one's self with the pleasures of the flesh, but in the pleasures of God lavished on us in our conversion. Suffering and lack cannot remove what Christ has given.

But secondly, as it relates to discipleship, our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ should have at its center this living and abiding word.

There was something terrible which happened in my marriage which I cannot explain. When Sarah dated me, I loved country music and board games. But when we got married, I stopped loving country music and board games.

This brought a sort of tension into our marriage, but we endured. Why? Because at the heart of our marriage was not music and board games, but a covenant of love.

If our relationships at church or in community group only revolve around hobbies, shared interests or specific life stages, we are putting our love at risk by placing in in what is perishable. Hobbies change, life stages develop, relationships morph. But if it is the gospel which forges a friendship in love, it will endure even when everything else changes.

When you assess what is at the bottom of the relationships with people in this church, is it this gospel? When was the last time you asked someone about their walk with Jesus, or the state of their soul?

We were changed for love, and our love is rooted in something outside of circumstances: our salvation in Jesus. The gospel moves from the fluidity of our world to the eternity of grace.

But the second truth this teaches us about love is that our *love has eternal value*.

Loving others believers will be hard. It will be costly. It will be inconvenient. It will at times be tearful. But it will never be wasted. Why? Because to love those who are truly our brothers and sisters is to love those who like us, will endure forever.

We have an apple tree in our back yard and it just started blooming this past week. But when I saw the buds this week, I remembered what happened last year. Last year the tree bloomed with beautiful white flowers that filled the frame of our kitchen window. But the very next day we had the wind storm of all windstorms and those flowers were quickly gone.

Paul is making the point here that all the things we love, even if they are good and beautiful things in this world, will just like those flowers, one day fall away. But those who are saved have this eternal, living and abiding word dwelling inside you. It cloaks us in eternity.

Remember what Peter said earlier: **1 Peter 1:3-5**.

We hedge our bets and make wise investments everywhere in our world, but here is an investment that lasts for all eternity!

All the things we love in this world will fade except for those who are made new by this never fading word. Is it true that the church will see people walk away from the faith? Yes. Will it grieve us? Yes.

Will people we love move away? Yes. Will people we love die long before they ought to? Yes.

But does this inhibit or limit our desire to love them? No.

Because to love people out of an overflow of the gospel is to invest our emotions in the hands of the same God who redeemed us. We trust God with our acts of love because we have seen how trustworthy his act of love was on the cross.

Have you been saved by that act of love? Then if so, let's throw aside portraits of love which are less than biblical and motivations for love that are less than effective and put on what Christ has done for us. May we be a church distinct in costly love for one another because we were saved by the costly love of another.