



ELECT EXILES – 1 PETER

GOSPEL LOVE

1 Peter 1:22-25

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

Introduction – “All You Need Is Love”

Today we’re going to talk about love, not only because our passage of Scripture calls us to love one another: “love one another earnestly from a pure heart” (1:22); but also because today is Valentine’s Day, of course.

Valentine’s Day is a perfect picture of mere human love. It is a day inspired by good intentions, a day filled with sentimentality and affection, a day marked by colorful displays of intimacy and love. But it’s all very short-lived, isn’t it? The romantic candle lit dinner soon fades to memory, the Hallmark cards are tossed in the trash, even the chocolates eventually all get eaten up. Valentine’s Day is a perfect picture of mere human love: everything is well-intended and heart-felt on this day, yet nothing is permanent; it’s all only temporary.

Let me suggest an analogy for mere human love. Human love is, if you will, like grass, and all its wonderful expressions—many of which we see on Valentine’s Day—are like the flower of grass. But, as our passage reminds us, quoting from the prophet Isaiah, “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls” (1:24). So, too, does mere human love. Human love is like grass: it lacks permanence; eventually it too, like grass, withers and falls.

Perhaps this is the problem in Hollywood. Perhaps this is why so many movie star marriages end before the ink on the marriage license even has a chance to dry. Many of these marriages are no doubt inspired by good intentions, they are filled with sentimentality and affection, and they are of course marked by colorful displays of intimacy and love. Yet so often they are so very short-lived; and soon enough the couple finds their faces once again on the cover of *People* magazine, though this time as a testimony to the fickleness and frailty of mere human love.

Ironically, in our culture there seems to be nothing we want more, and yet nothing we find more difficult to get, than love. Of course, everyone recognizes that love is the key to human relationships and the key to a happy society. No one will debate that point; everyone agrees, as the *Beatles* taught our culture to sing in the Sixties, “All You Need Is Love.”

All you need is love, all you need is love,
All you need is love, love, love is all you need.
All you need is love (all together now)
All you need is love (everybody)
All you need is love, love, love is all you need.

Would that it were only that easy! Would that it were as easy as that little jingle! It wasn't even that easy for the *Beatles* themselves, was it? In fact, just a year or two after the release of the hit song, "All You Need Is Love," this remarkable brotherhood realized that their love for one another had dried up, and so the band had to break-up and go their separate ways. Evidently, they had to go their separate ways because each was more interested in his own artistic and musical vision than in collaborating with one another. Sounds like another modern day parable on the fickleness and frailty of mere human love, doesn't it?

Friends, God has created us for a different kind of love: a pure and permanent, not fickle and frail, kind of love; a loyal and lasting, not selfish and short-lived, kind of love. God has created us for a different kind of love; as this passage says, we are to "love one another earnestly from a pure heart" (1:22). We were designed for a different kind of love: a divine kind of love, a supernatural kind of love, a love that neither falters nor fades but endures forever.

Yet God has not only created us for a different kind of love, he has also redeemed us in Christ Jesus to this different kind of love. In the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, God is recreating humanity for a different kind of love: gospel love. In Christ Jesus, we are called to love one another with something neither you nor I can create. We are called to love one another with a love only the gospel can create; we are called to love with gospel love.

Gospel Love Is Loyal Love

But what is Gospel love? What defines it? What characterizes it? The first thing that characterizes or defines gospel love is *loyalty*. Gospel love is loyal love. I get this from the fact that Peter says our love is to come "from a pure heart" (v. 22b).

Now, in the Bible, purity has to do with something being unmixed. In the Old Testament, we often see purity defined this way. A garment is pure if it is made with only one kind of material (Deut. 22:11); on the other hand, a marriage is impure if it is a mixed marriage, between an Israelite and a non-Israelite (Ezra 9:2). In the New Testament, the idea of purity is much the same, but it is internalized and thus often applied to the heart.

To love one another with a pure heart, then, means to love one another with an unmixed heart; or, as we would say, an *undivided* heart. A pure heart is an undivided heart, a devoted heart, a loyal heart; a pure heart is a heart pointed in one direction, not multiple directions; a pure is a heart given to one thing, not multiple things; a pure is a heart set on one thing, not many; a pure heart is the servant of one master, not many masters. To love with a pure heart is thus to love with devotion and loyalty; it is to love with sibling-like commitment. This is what this verse means when it calls us to love one another from a pure heart.

But how does this happen? It happens at *conversion*. It happens when you give yourself wholly to the Lord Jesus Christ. Conversion is all about transferring your allegiance to Christ, giving him your loyalties. And this has a way of purifying you, so to speak, so that you can love with gospel love. Or, as Peter says, in looking back to his hearers' own conversion, he says this of what happened to them: "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a

sincere brotherly love” (1:22). Conversion is how our lives are purified; conversion is how our lives are purged, so to speak, of all other competing allegiances so that we can become loyal to Christ.

But not just to Christ. But also to *the body of Christ, the family of faith*. You see, conversion transfers your allegiances to Christ, and then to the body of Christ, the family of faith, the church. There is therefore to be a loyalty to our love not only to Christ, but to other Christians, as well. Why? Because we have become with them one family; we have become brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. And so our love toward one another is to be characterized by what Peter here calls “a sincere brotherly love.” We are to love one another with sibling-like love, loyal love, gospel love.

So, as Peter will say a little later on in the letter, we are to “Honor everyone.” But, as he says in the very next breath, we are to “Love the brotherhood” (2:17). There is to be a loyalty to our love for the body of Christ, for fellow believers. We are to *prioritize* the needs of other believers; we are to be quick to respond in love to the members of our own family, our brothers and sisters in Christ. “As we have occasion, let us do good to everyone,” says the Apostle Paul, “and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (6:10). As believers, we are called to love one another from a pure heart, with a sincere sibling-like love, with loyal love, with gospel love.

Gospel Love Is Durable Love

Loyal love goes a long way to clarifying what gospel love is all about. But there is another important aspect to gospel love we need to see. The gospel love to which we are called is not only loyal, it is also durable. Gospel love is not fickle or frail or fragile, like mere human love. Gospel love doesn’t wear out, like a cheap pair of tennis shoes; in fact, gospel love cannot be destroyed. Gospel love is durable love. I get this from the fact that Peter says that we are to “love one another *earnestly* from a pure heart” (1:22).

Now, this word ‘earnestly’ here is intended, I think, to describe not the intensity of our love for one another, but the *duration* of our love for one another. In other words, we’re to love one another unceasingly or unswervingly or unremittingly. Our love is not to stop; it’s not to fail; it’s not to fatigue or tire or wear out. This is what this passage is calling us to: a durable love.

Of course, this is the true nature of biblical love. It perseveres through everything; it never ceases; it doesn’t stop. Or, as the Apostle Paul says in his famous celebration of the excellency of love in 1 Corinthians 13: “Love bear all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Cor. 13:7-8).

This is, after all, the kind of love we see in the Lord Jesus Christ himself, isn’t it? Consider the night on which Jesus was betrayed and handed over to be crucified. He was celebrating a final meal, the Passover feast, with his disciples, and there with them he expresses true gospel love. We can read about it in John 13: “Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that the hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (v. 1). Jesus Christ loves us with gospel love; he loves us with durable love; his love never falters or fades but endures forever. Nothing can “separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39).

Yet, brothers and sisters, we are called to love one another with this same kind of love, a love that loves to the end, a love that never fails. Of course, it would seem like an impossible

task, a burden that's impossible to bear. But it's not. Why not? Because, if you are in Christ, God has done something to you, something inside of you, that now enables you to love with a durable and indeed imperishable love. What has he done? He has caused you to be born again with a durable and indeed imperishable seed. You see how Peter supports his call to love one another unceasingly? You are to do so—you are enabled to do so—"since," as this passage says, "you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1:23).

The gospel is the living and abiding word of God; the seed that is sown in the soil of your heart is the grace of God, and it is an imperishable seed. The grace of God is the seed God himself plants in the soil of your heart, causing you to be born again. And when the grace of God takes root in your heart, it never goes away. It abides forever. For the grace of God cannot be uprooted. This is why, this is how, your love is to be durable love, gospel love.

Of course, there are many things in this life that will test the durability of our love. There is our own sin and the Flesh and the Devil, for starters. Then there are our own sufferings and hardships in this life, which tend to test the durability of our love for other people. But perhaps the most challenging test to the durability of our love for one another is when we are wronged by each other.

When another Christian wrongs you, it will test the durability of your love. If you love someone with mixed motives and he or she offends you, you will not respond well to them. And if you love someone with fickle love and he or she offends you, you will not be able to keep on loving them. Your love will prove it is not durable.

In other words, brothers and sisters, true gospel love, that is also durable love, is *forgiving* love. It is love that is strong and tenacious enough to forgive the wrong and forgive the hurt. This does not simply mean overlooking sin in another's life; no, gospel love is instead a call to *forgive* sin in another's life, especially when that sin has had an impact on you. Gospel love is durable love because it extends real forgiveness. And, as C. S. Lewis has said: "Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it."¹

This is precisely what God has done for us in the gospel: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). So, too, ought we to love one another in this way: "as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col. 3:13-14). Or, as Peter himself will say a little later on in this letter: "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins" (4:8). Because gospel love is forgiving love, gospel love is durable love. This is the kind of love we are called to in the gospel, the kind of love we have been recreated for because of having been born again through the gospel.

Gospel Love Is Created By The Gospel Itself

Bertrand Russell, certainly one of the most prolific philosophers of the twentieth-century, had mastered nearly every subject, save one: the subject of love. He was married four times, the first three ending in divorce as they were riddled with infidelity. With his second wife, they'd

¹ C. S. Lewis, "On Forgiveness," in *Weight of Glory*, p. 181.

agreed to a policy of 'openness' as it relates to extramarital affairs to see if that might allow more durability and longevity to the marriage relationship.

But, as it turns out, he found even this policy difficult to maintain. Russell was a staunch agnostic, but listen to how he explains the failure of his second marriage in terms of Christian love. What I want you to hear is not, of course, the outrageous so-called policy he had with his second wife. Instead, I want you to take note of his candid acknowledgment that he doesn't have the capacity to love.

In my second marriage I had tried to preserve this respect for my wife's liberty which I had thought that my creed enjoined. I found however that *my capacity for forgiveness and what may be called Christian love was not equal to the demands I was making on it* (*Intellectuals*, p. 216).

How can we have the capacity for forgiveness so that we can continue to love even when wronged? How can we have the capacity for Christian love and not find that the pressures of life crush our love? Answer: we must go to the gospel. For there we find the picture of love in the person of Jesus Christ; and there we receive the power to love through the person of the Holy Spirit. The gospel shows us Jesus; and the gospel gives us the Holy Spirit.

We must, then, brothers and sisters, *focus on the gospel itself as the remedy for our loveless heart*. Let our solutions to the lack of love in our hearts and in our marriages and in our parenting and in our Life Group and in our homes and in our relationships with other Christians, be solved by the gospel itself. Let us look there and not elsewhere. For only there do we find the perfection of love in the face of Jesus Christ; and only there do we find the power to love in the transformation the gospel alone brings.

Conclusion

So, on this Valentine's Day, as we celebrate the love we have for one another, let us remember that human love is but a pale shadow of divine love. God's love is infinitely more potent and powerful, more pure and reliable, more excellent and lasting, than even the best of human love. "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are." (1 John 3:1). Thus, let the affection you exchange for another be an opportunity to turn your ultimate affection to God himself, saying to yourself: "Because the Lord's steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you" (Psalm 63:3).

Let us also embrace the fact that we are called to love with a love only the gospel can create. Conversion alone, then, prepares the way for Christian love. We cannot love the way Christ would call us to love without being born again. We cannot love with purity without having our souls purified through conversion to the truth, and we cannot love with durability without having been born again with durable, imperishable seed. So let us look to the gospel alone, and in turn loving one another sincerely and unswervingly because of what he has done in our hearts, in our lives.

Amen.