

Sojourners: A Community Marked by Love

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1 Peter 1:22-25

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. ¹

Last week we saw that our conduct as a people should mark us and set us apart as exiles, as sojourners, as “weygoren”. Ben talked about Peter’s command to conduct ourselves in grace-cherishing, ransom-treasuring fear throughout the time of our exile. The week before that we learned from Mike Stone how having our hope set on the coming grace should also mark us, it should make us set apart and holy in the culture that we find ourselves in.

In our passage this morning Peter continues in the same vein. Not only is the letter opened by addressing these Christians “To those who are elect exiles” but we see toward the end of our text Peter quoting a passage in Isaiah that is meant to comfort the people of Israel who find themselves exiled in Babylon. Though Babylon seemed like an indomitable force in Isaiah’s day, he reminded the people of Israel, as Peter does hundreds of years later, that

“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.”

Though you seem marginalized and though you feel insignificant for your faith in Jesus, the word of the Lord remains forever. Though you do not see the glory of God covering the face of the earth like the waters cover the sea, the word of the Lord remains forever. Though you see the godless prosper and immoral revel in their sin, the word of the Lord remains forever. And the word of the Lord, the gospel of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, will culminate in unsurpassed and unmitigated glory in only a matter of time. Why? Because the word of the Lord remains forever.

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (1 Pe 1:22–25). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

But in the mean time, the way you live as an exilic community matters. This is what Peter has been saying. It matters that your hope is set on that future grace that is coming to you as surely as the sun has risen this morning. It matters that your conduct is marked by a peculiar fear of God. And this morning we'll see that our culture as a community—the way we relate to each other—matters too. I would like to convince you this morning that the defining mark of exilic culture is love.

Though outsiders should feel loved and welcomed when they rub shoulders with our community, what Peter is after in this passage is different than that. When outsiders rub shoulders with our community, Peter wants them to leave impacted not as much by how they were loved as by how much we seemed to love and care for one another. Peter wants our community to be marked not only by inclusivism, but by an other-worldly warmth and camaraderie and an intensity of love for one another.

You see I really was struck by this passage. Peter makes a somewhat shocking claim. How would you answer the question, “for what purpose have you been transformed by the gospel?” Before I studied this passage I would have answered by saying something like, the glory of God or to join the mission of God or for good deeds or something like that. But look at what Peter writes in v. 22,

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

What Peter is saying here is that belief in the truth of the gospel is supposed to lead to something. It is “for” something. Look at it carefully with me again and ask v. 22 this question: For what purpose have we been transformed by embracing the truth of the gospel?

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

Did you know that a church can have the right doctrine but still have a culture that isn't in sync with the doctrine it teaches? You can have obedience of the truth but not sincere brotherly love. So there are two categories we should be aware of and two goals we should strive for. Ray Orlund Jr addresses these two categories in a very short book he has published in the last couple years. The two categories are gospel doctrine and gospel culture. You can have orthodox, solid gospel doctrine and meanwhile embody a message in your church culture that preaches a different gospel—which is no gospel at all. He puts it this way when you have one but not the other:

Gospel doctrine – gospel culture = hypocrisy
Gospel culture – gospel doctrine = fragility
Gospel doctrine + gospel culture = power

According to Peter, the defining mark of our exilic culture should be love, which is the sum and total of a gospel-centered culture. Ortlund defines a gospel culture this way. It is . . .

“the corporate incarnation of the biblical message in the relationships, vibe, feel, tone, values, priorities, aroma, honesty, freedom, gentleness, humility, cheerfulness – indeed, the total human reality of a church [that is] defined and sweetened by the gospel.” (Ray)

This is what God is calling us to, this is what God is calling you to. You see the command that Peter gives is not, “expect the church you are a part of to love you perfectly.” The command is,

“love one another earnestly from a pure heart.”

The defining mark of exilic culture should be love, according to Peter. I’m calling that gospel culture. In the time that remains, I want to ask and answer three questions about this gospel culture we are called to embody. 1) What hinders gospel culture? 2) What creates gospel culture? And 3) What sustains gospel culture?

What hinders gospel culture?

This is a difficult passage to preach because no community comprised of sinners, even redeemed sinners, is perfectly marked by love. Far from casting a utopian or unrealistic vision of what our community life should be, I want to, with you, in faith humble ourselves under the word of God in the spectacular event that our community would be a supernatural one. But this will never happen unless we are honest about what hinders gospel community.

When Peter writes that we have been purified for a sincere brotherly love what he is implying is that moral impurity or sin is the main obstacle to sincere, earnest, authentic, pure love. Peter writes in 2:11,

“Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.”

It’s these sinful passions or desires that still, Christian, wage war against your soul, and if not checked, fought, repented of, these will tear at the relational fabric of any community. James writes as much in chapter 4 of his letter,

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.”

This is true of every human community. When our even good desires sinfully turn into demands or expectations that we place on one another, conflict is sure to

follow. And a culture devoid of love is created. What else explains the fact that even wealthy, educated, privileged families that make family the center of their lives experience broken relationships just like the rest of us?

What creates gospel culture?

But there is hope for us. Apart from Christ, no hope. But vast oceans of hope in Christ. Listen to the reason Peter gives that these Christians should love one another, starting again in v. 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 . . .”

Gospel culture is a gift of God because the new birth is a gift of God. What makes a gospel culture possible is the supernatural work of God in the giving of a new nature in Christ. If you look inside yourself, perplexed by your own sinful tendency to damage relationships, maybe what is needed is not communication techniques, education, relational counseling, or some other surface solution, but a new nature.

When we are born into this world we are born into sin. One way this has been described is by talking about how disordered our desires are. I want what I shouldn't want and I hate what I shouldn't hate. But when someone is born again through faith in the son of God, there is what Augustine described as a re-ordering of our desires. We begin to love what God loves and hate what God hates.

Peter is saying here that without the new birth being, love will not be possible. And positively, that we can and should love another since we have been born again by the God of love. We are God's kids. Our heavenly dad loves people really well and we can too since we are his.

What creates gospel culture? The new birth. But it is one thing to create or build a car, it is another thing to keep it going. What do you need to keep a car running? Fuel. Which brings us to our third question,

What sustains gospel culture?

You see, not only does Peter tell us that love should be the defining mark of our relational culture, that it is made possible by the new birth, but he also tells us how to sustain a community marked by love, and surprisingly it's not by focusing on making our community marked by love.

This principle is true in many other areas in life, right? Do you want to have friends, don't seek friendship, do stuff you enjoy and then look to your left and to your right? Do you want a promotion, don't seek the promotion itself (that's annoying) but look away from the promotion and put your effort into becoming great at what you do. Do you want a church community marked by love, don't preach love, but according

to Peter, preach the gospel, share the gospel, live in the gospel, lean on the gospel. Comfort one another with the gospel. Remind one another of the gospel.

Edmond Clowney writes,

“Christian love may be demonstrated by a hug, a holy kiss, or a helping hand, but Christian love cannot be transmitted that way. Christian love is born as Christians are born: through the truth of the gospel.”²

We see this in two places. In v. 22, Peter says that obedience to the truth, which is Peter’s way of describing whole-hearted faith in the gospel, is “for a sincere brotherly love.” Therefore, a robust, day after day, moment by moment, belief in the gospel of God’s love and reign in Christ results in brotherly love.

We also see this principle toward the end of v. 22 and into v. 23 as well,

“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”

Tim Chester writes,

“What forms and sustains Christian community is, perhaps paradoxically, not a commitment to community per se but a commitment to the gospel word.”³

That is, gospel doctrine, rightly embraced, sustains gospel culture. How exactly does this look? Ray Ortlund helps us understand. He writes,

“There is a lot of love in this world, most of it moderate. But under the blessing of God, gospel doctrine cracks our hearts open to receive something from beyond this world. We see how massive God’s love really is, and so we give up our aloofness and come together to care for one another in real ways, even as God wonderfully cares for us. That is when a church starts looking like a community where the God of John 3: 16 dwells in power. That is when the world can see his love in reality, and many will join us in Christ and live forever. Gospel doctrine creates a gospel culture, and it matters.”⁴

² Clowney, 75

³ Chester, 60

⁴ Ortlund Jr., Raymond C. (2014-04-30). The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ (9Marks: Building Healthy Churches) (Kindle Locations 405-409). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

It seems like it would make sense to stop at this point because we have seen already what gospel culture is, what hinders it, what creates it, and what sustains it. But Peter has more than one answer to the final question of what sustains it. Look again with me at our passage, toward the end of v. 22,

“... 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.”

Here’s the question I had when I read this passage: why does Peter describe the seed we were reborn by as imperishable rather than merely powerful. What is his logic? Love one another, since you were born again by imperishable seed? Powerful, I would readily understand. He would be saying, you are really able to love each other, you have all the resources you need through Christ. But imperishable? Love one another, since you were born again by imperishable seed? The new birth you received is imperishable, but how is that a reason to love one another?

Wayne Grudem rephrases the logic this way,

“Love one another (v. 22), for you have all been born anew into a fellowship of God’s people which will last eternally (v. 23).”

Tim Chester elaborates,

“The point is this: because the Word is imperishable, the family is imperishable. We [were] born into this family through an imperishable Word, so it is an imperishable family. Human families perish because they break up through conflict or because they are separated through death, but our new family endures.”⁵

What sustains gospel culture? Not only a functional cherishing of the gospel word, but also the truth that this community is not merely a club or a co-op, it’s a family that you have been placed into. You see, when God “caused you to be born again” you were joined to Jesus Christ, God became your father, and you were given a new family. Earthly families fracture, break, and dissolve, but the family you have been joined to will last forever. When Jesus’ earthly mother and brothers sent someone to fetch Jesus when he was with his disciples, he responded to the messenger by asking, “who are my mother and my brothers?” And then looking at those who were with him he said, are not these my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God is my mother and my brother. Jesus has created a family around himself that is actually thicker than blood. And it will never fracture, break, or dissolve, and do you know why? Because the word of the Lord remains forever.

Let’s pray,

⁵ Chester, 62

Father, we want love to be the defining mark of this community. We want the tone, vibe, feel, and texture of our culture to feel and taste like the gospel. We confess that our sin and unbelief is the greatest barrier to the creation of a gospel culture. And so Lord we, bankrupt in ourselves, ask that you pour your love into our hearts. We know that we will not love one another until we have really experienced your love for us in Christ. And so Lord we pray that we would be swallowed up in the love of God. Cause there to be a gentleness, a warmth, and a love in this place for one another because of the gentleness, warmth, and love we have experienced in our savior's embrace. I pray that our love for one another would be earnest, sincere, pure, and a giving love because we have been overwhelmed by the earnest, sincere, pure, and giving love of God in Christ. Father we thank you for the gospel and for the life it brings us, a life that will remain forever. Amen.