

How Now Shall We Love?

1 Peter 1:22-2:3

2/21/16

John Song

Well, it's a great privilege and honor to be here with you this Sunday morning as we get to hear from God's Word. As Wayne introduced, my name is John Song. I am the somewhat new Director of Youth Ministries here at CPC. And the pastoral team has asked me to come and speak to us today, continuing our series on 1 Peter. So if we could all turn our Scriptures to 1 Peter 1:22.

And while you are turning to this passage, I want to remind you of what both Randy and P.D. have spoken up here before. This is a book dedicated to those who are living in spiritual exile, learning how to live as believers in another land. And that, based on the truths of the gospel that lays the foundations, the commands that Peter is now giving here—the foundation that was set in the twenty-one verses before verse twenty-two. As we read God's Word, let's remind ourselves of the gospel prior to this. And let us read from verse twenty-two all the way to chapter two, verse three.

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For,

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.”

And this is the word that was preached to you.

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray together.

Father, help us to understand who we are in light of you—ones who have been perfectly loved, so that we can love each other as a community and body of Christ. Be with the preaching of your Word in Spirit and in truth this morning. Convict us to love the body as your Son did. We pray this in his name. Amen.

Well, I do want to start off by introducing myself a little bit here. I hope not out of vanity or anything like that, but more to give you time to think about how you would answer this question—and that's the question of, how would you describe yourself to someone that you've never met before? What would be the things that you would try and actively say to get them to know you and know who you are and what defines you? Now, I did this exercise with the highschoolers and the middle-schoolers here in Shine and Revolution, but I want to extend this out to everyone here, because this is going to lead directly into my talk about what it means to exhibit Christian brotherly and sisterly love. So as I'm saying all these things about myself, I want you to think about how you would answer this question.

And so here are some of the things that I would note. I'm the son of an immigrant first-generation Korean family. I'm a naturalized American born in L.A., Paramount, California. I'm a pastor's kid. Or maybe even, for better or for worse, a senior pastor's kid. Is Caroline—no, Caroline's not here. Sorry. All right. I'm a Wild Lake Wildcat. I'm a Baltimore Oriole. I'm a Maryland Terrapin. And I'm occasionally a Washington Wizard. I'm a competitive gamer who has placed in some national tournaments. I'm a meat

and potatoes guy. I'm thirty. I'm an introvert—an INFJ, if I wanted to be more specific. I'm a former nondenominational Baptist Pentecostally perennial continuationist turned into a converted, reformed Presbyterian a-millennial sensationist—for better or for worse. I was a music teacher in Howard County. I was an occasional oboist now turned into a less-occasional guitar guy. I'm a child of the 80s, and one of those scary millennials that you keep on hearing such crazy things about.

Now, what about you? How would you describe yourself? How would you identify? What labels would you use? Would those terms even be accurate? Would you be satisfied knowing that in that brief introduction that you gave to somebody, that they would really get to know you and know who you really are? You see, the point of this exercise was not to let you know who I really am, because sadly none of those things describe who I really am. They're things to help. They don't really get to the core of who I am. And my guess is that if you were introduced to someone very shortly, you wouldn't necessarily feel satisfied either.

If people were only able to look at you in those extremely limited and terse terms, you may feel like they would mischaracterize you in ways that, you know, would be unfair, maybe unkind. And when we become satisfied with labels becoming primary—i.e., like, people are simply monolithic; they're only the labels which we view them—we deny the very fabric and creative work of how God has created us to be, how God has created each and every single one of us. The complexity of identity and what it means to live in that identity is something that needs to be fleshed out. And we need to talk about it. We need to speak in new words.

This is the heart of what I believe Peter is trying to describe here in this first passage in 1 Peter. He's ministering and writing this letter to a group of individuals who are now placed in a new land with the new label of Christian. They come from profoundly different backgrounds, lifestyles, cultures. They're now called to co-exist in a region of the world that is foreign to them, living in a community of exiles. And the question for them is a question for us. The question of faith in this kind of situation, where everything is new. It's fresh. You don't, perhaps, know what the future holds. You're trying to grasp everything around you, and you're sort of asking yourself, "Well, what now?" How do we live now? How shall we exist in this new world, a world that's going to be harmful to Christians, a world that is filled with profound suffering and pain? What exactly is the Christian life?

Peter doesn't want to live in broad categories. He wants them to exactly understand what Christian identity is all about. He wants them to understand how the gospel calls them to live explicitly. And having laid the foundation of the first twenty-one verses in 1 Peter chapter one, he now spends the rest of 1 Peter talking about what those implications are all about. He does this first by reminding them of their calling, which we heard about last week—the call to hope, holiness, and fear. But now he gets more into specifics.

And so now the question turns from how now shall we live, to how now shall we love. Now, to be fair, Peter is not interested in sort of this broad kind of a love. Just as he isn't just talking about a broad kind of Christianity. He wants to detail specifically what kind of love this is talking about. Now, before we get into this—I know some of you when you hear the word "love" in the way that we're used to it in society, it might be like a useless, junk-drawer term. Because we overuse the word too much. We love our children, and we love Taco Bell. Right? We love our grandparents, but we also love that new, you know, shopping bag that we got. We love everything, and sometimes that means that we almost love nothing, right?

But what Peter is trying to say here specifically about love is that Peter is emphasizing a sincere brotherly and sisterly love in the church. He's talking about a love for the church and a love for the community of believers of God. That's the kind of love that he's talking about here. So again, Peter doesn't want to think broadly. He wants to think specifically. So maybe the question is not how now shall we love, but how now shall we love in the church.

And Peter comes right out of the gate with an interesting paradox here—a paradox that covers the rest of the letter. It is a love paradox. Look at verse twenty-two with me. He says that “you have already perfectly loved. Having purified your souls by the obedience to the truth for having a sincere and brotherly love, love one another earnestly.” That’s an interesting little paradox here. He’s using both the perfect and the present tense at the same time. Having purified your souls, love one another earnestly. What’s going on here? Is this just bad fisherman English that Peter is using? I mean, what’s going on?

See, I believe that Peter actually is claiming something here about the Christian reality, the Christian life. We live in this tension. As ones who are perfectly clean through the blood of Jesus Christ, his love is perfected in us. Yes and amen, but we already have this phase of the not-yet of the Christian life, which states of the ongoing work of Christ in us. This isn’t so much a contradiction as more that we know that, as Christians, we know the end of the movie. We’re not just pushing forward to reveal the ending. This tension of the already and not yet helps us to—prevents us from waiving too soon the flag of victory, as if we have nothing more in this life to do than just say that everything’s going to be all right in the end. But it also keeps us from going the other way. It keeps us from going into despair every time the world turns away from God and we feel like nobody understands us.

This tension between who we are in the sight of God and eternity, and between who we are in the sight of God temporarily, keeps us grounded in our faith to trust in God every single day in every single moment—that there is a God who has redeemed us and is redeeming us, each and every single moment. This tension gives us purpose and meaning in every single action in our lives, that God is indeed in control. But it also reminds us that failure, pain, and suffering are indeed realities that we will live in. This tension in love through our union in Christ means that we are all, believers, united to him, that we do love him and love each other perfectly. But the reality is that we need to persevere in that love every single day.

So let’s make this analogy a little bit more clear. I know that there are many parents in the room. Right now, parents, if you could look into the eyes of your children, you will know that you have already loved them completely ever since they were born. But I’m sure if we were to be honest here, I know that there are many, many, many days where your child does things that severely challenges that confession of love and makes you question in the morning whether or not you really or not love your child. Can I get an amen on that? Right? Okay, good. And so you fight to love, even though you already have loved. And that’s Peter’s challenge here.

So what is the basis for this love? And now we may be asking ourselves, how can we love like this? How is this even possible? By the strength of our own teeth, we just need to wake up in the morning and think harder, try harder, do better, to love one another earnestly? I mean, I think for all of us, we’ve tried all that. And it’s difficult. We feel like we fail at it so often. How do we do this? How do we love like this? Well, Peter goes on to say that we can do this not because of our own ability to do so, but because of the character of Christ that we are united to. He calls us to remember this character in verses twenty-three to twenty-five. If you look over those verses again, it’s Peter’s reminder that the reason we can persevere in this love is based upon the character of the Word of Christ. This is a Word that spiritually calls us to be born again to new life. This is a Word that has drawn us out from death. This is a Word that is spiritual food to our soul. It restores us, changes us, transforms us.

Now, when I say all this, this might all seem—especially for some of you who are new to the Christian faith—this might all seem very new. Might all seem like something in an infomercial that you would watch late in the hours of the evening. You know, one of those commercials of, like, I don’t know, like, the absorbable towels made in Germany. Right? Like Sham-wow, right? It will somehow transform and change your life. I mean, it almost seems too good to be true, right? It almost sounds ridiculous. You’re talking about an infinite God who loves me completely. Me, specifically. You’re talking about an infinite God who would make me feel like I’m born again for the very first time. I can experience the joy of this love and community. You’re talking about a God—we don’t believe in that.

Why? Because we're programmed by the relationships in the world around us to not believe in it. We've been hurt too many times to even trust in a God like that. We know how this is all going to turn out, right? We're too smart. Why would we need to lie to ourselves to make ourselves feel better, that somewhere there's a God that wants to love us? I mean, this is the culture of what we live in today. We have a hard time trusting in the words of people. We have a hard time trusting that the words that they say are, indeed, what they really promise and who they are. So this is why people tell us, you know, don't trust God, don't trust his Word, don't trust what he's trying to say to you.

But if we were really honest with ourselves here—and I'm speaking to those who may feel like they have this hard time trusting in Christ. You may find it hard to trust in the Words of God here today, but what you have done is maybe you've placed that trust in someone else. You've placed another authority to give you truth in your life. The bible speaks to that as our inward desire to worship, that we're all somehow called to worship someone or something. And the question is not whether or not we're naïve to believe someone's words. The question is, whose words are you listening to?

So rather than looking to a God that we know is faithful, a God that we can trust, a God whose words we can hold onto, we turn to someone else. I mean, go on any social media website today—Facebook, Twitter—you'll find a long string of comments defending, you know, your favorite celebrity, musician, poorly dressed politician, or health and wealth gospel preacher. And you'll see that these comments all are defending the words of their chosen authority. "That's not what he really meant to say." "If you really knew the person, you would know that that's not who they are."

So I want to speak to those here today, especially if you feel skeptical about the truths of Christianity. You feel skeptical about God's Words, that 1 Peter is saying imperishable. We claim here at CPC that our God is great, because he is and claims everything that he has claimed about himself, every word, every phrase, is indeed true. We can hold onto it, that what he has said he would do, he has done. That Christ loves us so much that he would die to take away our sins and rise again and give us his righteousness, to show us that he has victory over Satan, sin, and death. That with every fibre of his being, his love for us, he goes to die on the cross. That he promises to send the Spirit of God both in us as a seal and a guide, so that when life seems unbearable, he brings us the light of grace in each and every single moment. He gives us the perseverance to endure and make it through. His Words provide us peace when there can be no peace at all. When our jobs continually make us suffer, when our relationships lose trust, when life just seems completely unfair and we have no way out, we are reminded each and every day of Christ's Words. We're reminded of his suffering and persecution. And we press forward. And we live in those loving words. We remind ourselves daily of the love of Christ. That Spirit of the Lord guides us to that perfect love.

This is the constant narrative of God's Word. When Israel loses its way, they are reminded again of God's fierce and faithful love for them. When they're in the desert, wandering. When they are in exile. When they are restoring the walls and the temple. In Exodus 34, Nehemiah 9, Hosea 3—what is the constant cry of Scripture? The Lord is faithful, slow to anger, abounding in perfect love. We can trust in his words, because it has been proven time and time and time and time again. He loves you.

And so when we're able to focus in on that great love that he has for us, suddenly we can love each other more honestly and perfectly because of the character of who Christ is—not because we're so great. Because this is different than the way that we're told to love each other, after all. Right? We're told that love is based on similar interests and causes. Love is based on simply how you're feeling. Love is a choice. Love is a preference. Love is selfish. Love is exclusive and separating. But this is not the love of Christ. I mean, even here in Howard County, love is what? Love is performance. One of the highest median incomes, one of the best in top schools.

Everything around us tells if you want to be loved, you have to perform. You have to succeed. Not only must you succeed—you must be excellent in everything. That is the key to love. And this is what

makes Christianity so radical, is saying that the love of Christ is free. It is unmerited. It is a love that is given to you regardless of who you are or what you have done. That is the love that drive us as a church to Christ. This is the power of the Bible that you hold in your hands—that every time you open it and read it and explore it, you are living in those words.

So having given the prescription of how now shall we love, in chapter two verse one, Peter's expectations continue. And it says all these things about putting malice away and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. And this is more than just the exhortation. If we were just to sort of isolate this verse apart from what surrounds it, it's more than just the simple list of do-not's. Far from it. Peter is saying, "You want to know how we exist in Christ's body to love one another? You want to know how to love each other radically and different than the culture? You want to know how we love each other different as a church that looks different from the world? Here's how to live as the body of Christ. Separate all dividing lines that would tear us apart. This is what true love is.

I mean, think about Peter's community, right? Look at 1 Peter 1:1. Look at the very opening verse. Look at the diversity of believers that are here. "To the elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontius." I mean, you've got people who would say, "Really? You want me to get along with the Pontiuses? The Galatians? The Cappadocians? You want me to get along with the people from Asia? I mean, do you know how weird those Asians are?" Peter knew inherently that there would be all different kinds of dividing lines. There would be all these excuses people would make for why the body of Christ should live separately. Peter was aware that sinners are predisposed to divide, ruin, destroy. And this is why, too often, when the world looks at the church, they say that it really looks no different than the world around them. He wanted to say in these verses, "Look. Whatever labels you want to use to divide each other, love each other through them. Whatever clever ways you want to justify division in the church, get rid of it. Learn to love and lithe in labels."

Lithe is a dance term. It means to be graceful, flexible. Right? You know, because when you think about it—for you dancers in the room; I can't really dance, but for you dancers in the room, right? When you're dancing with a partner, if you hold them too rigidly, or if you try to insist on your own way, try and be too forceful, if you try and only be in control of both people—it doesn't work. But when we learn to love and lithe each other in the church, even though we're different, even though there are things that would separate us in the life of the church, we can suddenly see the perfect work of the body in us.

So your brother and sister around you—dare we look at our brother and sister around us? They might have different identifying markers. They might be doctors, lawyers, professors, blue-collar workers, nonprofit. They might be baby boomers, millennials, gen-exers, right? They may even like sports teams not from this area, right? They may be Patriots, Cowboys, or even Yankees, right? None of these labels should be held so rigidly that they cannot be both loved and lithed. There's push and pull, give and take, forgiveness and grace. That's the love of the church. And that's what brings us the longing—longing for the Lord of love. Longing like a newborn infant, as Peter describes in verses two and three.

He uses spiritual milk here as a reference to the Word of God, to remind us that every time that we fail in that love, we remind ourselves that we have received a love far greater than what we deserve. And he uses this spiritual analogy of milk to remind us that it's not only something that we know, but it's something that we've tasted, something that we've experienced. And we're about to do that here together. We're about to take the Lord's Supper. And when we do that, as we take the blood and body of Jesus Christ that was shed for us, it reminds us not only of the love of Christ, but also the love that we fail to exhibit and show to each other. It reminds us that we are not yet done in the work of having purified our souls to a brotherly love. That's what these elements that we're about to take remind us again and again.

We long for communion. We long for the Lord's Supper. And not simply just because it's a little memorial service for Christ. But these elements of the bread and juice extend to us the grace and call us

to taste and see that the Lord is good again, and again, and again. And as we long for Christ, we will long for this community, one another. I've been here seven weeks, and it's been incredible to see the ways that you all have supported and encouraged me in my new role. It's been incredible to see the love that I see every week. People here 'til 10:00 p.m. every night, serving and loving members of the community and the church together. Let's continue on in that love for each other. And as we partake of the Lord's Supper together, let us be reminded of the Lord of love, the one that we long for, to see one of these days face to face, when our love will be complete. Let's pray together.

Father, it is indeed true that we love because you first loved us with a perfect love that we fail to match. If we were to be honest with ourselves, our sin drives us to divide even those within the life of the church. God, I pray that we would be able to cast all of those things away, we would see each other united to Christ. And as the body, let us love each other perfectly—not because of our own merit or because we're capable of doing it, but because your love is perfecting itself in us each and every single day. So God, as we partake in the Lord's Supper, let us be reminded of Christ richly and deeply, that forgiveness is available for those seeking it. Let's share in the love of Christ. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.