

Tony Campolo tells the following story: Miss Thompson taught Teddy Stallard in the fourth grade. He was a slow, unkempt student, a loner shunned by his classmates. The previous year his mother died, and what little motivation for school he may have once had – was now gone.

Miss Thompson didn't particularly care for Teddy either, but at Christmas time he brought her a small present. Her desk was covered with well-wrapped presents from the other children, but Teddy's came in a brown sack. When she opened it there was a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with half the stones missing and a bottle of cheap perfume. The children began to snicker but Miss Thompson saw the importance of the moment. She quickly splashed on some perfume and put on the bracelet, pretending Teddy had given her something special.

At the end of the day, Teddy worked up enough courage to softly say, "Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother . . . and her bracelet looks real pretty on you too. I'm glad you like my presents." After Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and prayed for God's forgiveness. She prayed for God to use her as she sought to not only teach these children but to love them as well.

She became a new teacher. She lovingly helped students like Teddy, and by the end of the year, he had caught up with most of the students. Miss Thompson didn't hear from Teddy for a long time. Then she received this note: "Dear Miss Thompson, I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class. Love, Teddy Stallard."

Four years later she got another note: "Dear Miss Thompson, they just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it. Love, Teddy Stallard."

*Four years later: "Dear Miss Thompson, as of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. **How about that?** Anyway, I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year. Love, Teddy Stallard." Miss Thompson went to the wedding and sat where Teddy's mother would have sat, because she let God use her as an instrument of encouragement.*

That's a great story because it reveals the power of love, and how love, even just a little bit, can change the entire life of a person who needs to be loved. It's a touching story, it's a hopeful story, but it's also a convicting story because I don't always love others the way I should.

We have been making our way through **1 Peter**, which is a letter written to several churches in Asia Minor who were experiencing severe persecution and suffering. As we have read thus far, this letter by Peter has been a letter of *hope*, encouraging his readers to look up and move onward through the hardships and the trials – knowing there is an unimaginable life to come in the future for those who are in Christ.

This letter has also serves as a reminder that we are to live a life of *holiness*, even in the midst of hardships and trials, because our heavenly Father is holy, because someday our works – *what we do* and *why we do what we do* will be judged for rewards, and most importantly, we are to live a life of holiness because we have been redeemed – ransomed from the bondage and the penalty of sin by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

So, with all of that said, you would think that those who look up in *hope* and those who walk in *holiness* would be able to love one another and live in *harmony*, but we know that is not always the case. One of the painful facts of life is that the people of God – brothers and sisters in Christ – sadly, do not always get along with each other, and in a world full of anger and contention and division, typically over things that have no eternal value whatsoever, if there is a body of people who should live in harmony and unity, if there is a body people who should rise above the hatred and the strife and really love one another – it should be the church – the body of Christ, and that’s what I want to explore with you this morning.

We are going to pick up where we left off last week, so turn with me to **1 Peter 1**, and we will begin with **verse 22**. Peter says,

Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart,

It would appear that these believers in Asia Minor were not only experiencing persecution and suffering from those outside the church, but maybe they were also struggling with members of their own church family. Keep in mind, in these first century churches, members found themselves in these new and different and maybe even awkward relationships. For example, Jews and Gentiles were now worshipping side by side – a practice completely foreign and prohibited under Judaism. In addition, masters and slaves were now brothers in Christ – so, all these relationships they were previously accustomed to in their culture had dramatically changed – but fortunately, they had changed as well – for they were born-again.

When reading this verse, I will admit it was a little difficult to understand because of the way it is laid out, so let me share it in a way that will hopefully be a little clearer. Peter says, and I am paraphrasing, “*As a result of your salvation – since you are born-again and are walking in obedience to the truth which has this cleansing effect in your life – giving full proof of this by your brotherly love – go deeper and **love one another.***”

Peter commands us to **love one another** – that’s the main point here, and in context, this command is focused on loving our Christian brothers and sisters. Because of our salvation, God has given us the capacity to love others, and He has given us a family to share this love with. In fact, one of the evidences of being truly born-again is the love we have for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In **1 John 4:7-8**, the Apostle John tells us, “*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.*”

You may not always agree with your brothers and sisters – that’s just a given, but you still have to love them none-the-less.

Now, if you noticed in **verse 22**, Peter mentions the word **love** two times, and I bring this up because these two words don’t mean the same thing. When Peter mentions **love of the brethren**, he is using the Greek word *phileo*, which is half of the larger Greek word *philadelphia*. That word describes a brotherly affectionate love – a love for one another just like the love typically seen between natural family members.

Simply put, since we are born-again, walking in obedience to the truth, it’s a given that we share this brotherly love for one another – for we are part of the same spiritual family – and we have the same heavenly Father.

Peter also mentions that this brotherly love is to be **sincere**, literally meaning without hypocrisy. Brotherly love shouldn’t be *two-faced*, where you pretend, where you wear a mask, so to speak, pretending you care for someone when your words and your actions behind the scenes tell a completely different story. Brotherly love for one another is a given in the family of God, it’s expected, and has to be sincere – it has to be the real thing.

Peter’s second use of the word **love** is different, it goes much deeper, and this kind of love is commanded by God, so we had better pay attention to this.

Peter says to **fervently love one another from the heart**. This is a different kind of love. Here, Peter uses the Greek word *agapao* or *agape* which in essence means to sacrifice one's self for the greater good of another. This is the highest kind of love, it describes the love that Jesus showed to us, and it comes from God – for He is the source of this love. This is not a love which we produce on our own, rather this deeper *agape* love starts with God, it comes down to us, and then flows out from us to other people. God has given us, as believers, the capacity to share His divine love to another – to share His heart with someone else.

Now, there's something else I want to tell you about this deeper *agape* love. This kind of love is unconditional, meaning it reaches out to another person with no strings attached. It is sacrificial in nature, it's selfless – giving itself to another without demanding or expecting anything back in return, and it's a deliberate love – that is, it's an act of our will – it's a choice we make. It's not a love which is based on warm fuzzy feelings or emotions, rather it's an act of our will, whereby we chose to treat others the way God treats us – period. God loves us, so we love others. God forgives us, so we forgive others. God is gracious to us, so we are gracious to others. God is kind to us, so we are kind to others. God is patient with us, so we are patient with others, and so on. Again, this *agape* love is not about emotions or feelings – it's about the choice we make, it's about our willingness, and ultimately, it's an act of obedience to God – for we are commanded by God to love one another in this deeper *agape* way.

Peter added that this *agape* love is to be **fervently** shared. That word fervently gives the image of stretching out to the limit or straining with all of one's effort to reach the goal line. In other words, the kind of love that God desires to see flowing through us, that deeper *agape* love, can be very challenging to give – it can be down-right difficult to share because it often involves loving those who might be hard to love.

Perhaps you've seen the Peanuts cartoon: Linus announces to his cranky sister, Lucy, that he's going to be a doctor.

"You, a doctor?" she asks. "How can you be a doctor? You don't love mankind." Linus replies, "I do too love mankind. It's people I can't stand."

Let's be honest. It's easy to love people who love you back, but we know that's not always the case. Many of you find yourselves in relationships where loving someone is very difficult – you've been hurt, you've been wronged, your love is not returned, or your love has been rejected – I get it, it's difficult, it's challenging, it's hard, and quite frankly – if we're going to be honest here – you don't feel like

loving them. It's the last thing you want to do. I get it, but this deeper *agape* love is not based on your feelings for the other person, and it's not based on their being deserving of your love – again, it's an act of obedience to God – meaning you have the God given capacity to share this love, but you also have a choice to obey God or not. It's a choice, it's a decision you make whereby you allow God to share His love to someone else through you. So, since you have been born-again, because God is doing a work in your life, since your heart has been changed, you are to respond in obedience to God by **loving one another** – even loving those who might seem unlovable.

And how might God teach you and me to love like this? By putting us around hard to love people. There really is no better way to learn to love others in this deeper *agape* way. I mean, if you only associate with nice, sweet, fun, and loving people, **will you ever learn to love the way God wants you to love – the way He loves you?** I don't think so. That might help explain some of the difficulties in your relationships. That might explain why there are people in your life that you don't particularly like, but you can only learn to love in this deeper *agape* way by being around those hard to love people.

Because we are saved, because we look up to God, it should influence how we relate to others. Our vertical relationship with God should impact our horizontal relationships with one another, and if it doesn't, then you need to evaluate your relationship with God because one flows from the other. If that sounds too harsh, if that sounds too judgmental on my part, then listen to what the Apostle John tells us. He says in **1 John 4:20**,

“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother who he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.”

What's John saying here? Show your love to God by loving your Christian brothers and sisters, and if you aren't loving your brothers and sisters, people right in front of you – if you aren't loving one another, then you are revealing that you really aren't loving God either. Years ago, I heard this quote by Dorothy Day where she said, *“I really only love God as much as the person I love the least.”*

That thought might keep you up at night, but it drives home the point that every claim we make to love God is a delusion if it is not accompanied by love for one another. Our love for God and our love for one another is all connected. They are inseparable – you can't have one without the other.

Okay, let's move on to **verse 23** where Peter says,

for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.

What's our motivation to love others in this deeper *agape* way? It's the truth of the Gospel – the truth of God's Word that tells us God loved us with an *agape* love, even though we were still yet in our sin, even though we wanted nothing to do with God, even though we did not deserve His love, even though we were absolutely unlovable – God made a choice and He loved us – He saved us. Therefore, we love because God first loved us.

At the moment of your salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, after receiving the truth of God's Word – after receiving the Gospel, as a seed planted in your heart, you were given a new life and a new nature. You are born of God – and because it's the nature of our heavenly Father to love – as His child, it's your new nature to love as well. Love is now part of your spiritual DNA.

You have the God given capacity to love others with an *agape* love because you are born-again. Now, it's only a matter of choice – to obey God's Word or not, and if you really think about it from that perspective, this whole matter of loving one another has more to do about God than it has to do about people you like and don't like.

I read a devotion years ago and the writer said this, *“I have often said that the hardest thing to do as a Christian is to obey God, and yet the easiest thing to do is obey God – as soon as you decide He is God.”*

Loving one another is about your relationship with God, knowing God, taking Him at His Word, and choosing to obey Him – which leads us to **verse 24**.

²⁴ For, “All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls off, ²⁵ but the word of the Lord endures forever.” And this is the word which was preached to you.

I tend to cringe a bit when a New Testament writer quotes something from the Old Testament because sometimes it is difficult to understand the reason for using the quote and at other times, I find it difficult to put the Old Testament quote into context within the New Testament passage. In this passage, Peter quotes from **Isaiah 40**.

In context, Isaiah was writing to God's people who were taken into captivity in Babylon. They were being afflicted and oppressed for nearly 70 years, and Isaiah wrote to comfort them and to assure them that God would keep all of His promises and return them back to their Promised Land. God's Word was good and sure, and that was the main point of both Isaiah and Peter – that God was faithful and His Word was true. You can take God at His Word.

Everything else would fade away – the grass would wither, the flower would fail, and people would die – but the Word of God would endure forever. God's Word through Isaiah proved to be absolutely true, and Peter reassured his readers that the same gospel that was preached to them likely earlier by Paul, the same gospel they had received, the same gospel that had changed their lives, the same gospel that is lasting and enduring – that gospel – must be given your attention and obeyed. And, their salvation, after receiving the gospel of God's *agape* love for them, is their basis to **love one another** – and ours as well.

There is one last thing I want to mention about our love for one another. In **John 13:34-35** Jesus said,

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

In this passage, Jesus mentioned the word **love** four times. All four times, Jesus used the Greek word *agape*, and I say all of that to say this: A lost and dying world will not believe that God really loves them until they see God's love in action, being shared by us – we must **love one another**.

A Salvation Army worker found a homeless woman alone on the street and invited her to come into the chapel for help, but the woman refused to move. The worker assured her: “We love you and want to help you. God loves you. Jesus died for you.” But the woman did not budge.

As if on divine impulse, the worker leaned over and kissed the woman on the forehead, taking her into her arms. The woman began to sob, and like a child was led into the chapel, where she ultimately trusted Christ.

Later she said to the worker, “You told me that God loved me, I've heard that before, but it wasn't till you showed me that God loved me that I wanted to be saved.”

Source Material:

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