

All Your Relationships: A Compendium

1 Peter 1.22-23, 2-1-12, 17

1.3.16

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,²³ for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.

Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander,² like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation,³ if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.⁴ And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God,⁵ you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.⁶ For this is contained in Scripture: "BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED."⁷ This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, "THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone,"⁸ and, "A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE"; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.⁹ But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;¹⁰ for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.¹² Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.

¹⁷ *Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.*

Happy New Year to you all...I'm happy and grateful that we're all together for this first service of 2016.

I hope you'll linger a little bit after the service and spend some time interacting with people you don't always see on Sunday mornings because you attend different worship services...some are here from the 11:00 and some from the 8:30... but TODAY (!) we are all together...and that's a good thing!

Today, we look at a letter written by the Apostle Peter to a group of churches in ancient Turkey (a Presbytery!) and Peter is helping them understand their new situation i.e. what has changed since they have become believers in Jesus Christ.

To understand this, they have to see WHO THEY ARE and then therefore HOW THEY ARE TO RELATE to their surroundings. This is, of course, a question that modern people ask, "Who am I?"...what are the most important descriptors that identify me... is gender, is nationality, is

parentage, is education or religion or job/vocation, income, political affiliation, taste in clothing/food/music/art/style...am I simply the sum total of these factors...is that WHO I AM?

OR am I whomever I feel that I am...despite my gender or body...or marital status. Maybe I'm a man...who weighs 350 pounds but I FEEL like a prima ballerina... am I able to say "THAT is who I really am?" When does that become absurd? Our society continues to wrestle with the identity question.

Peter faces it head-on...and he shows that if believers in Jesus Christ GET IT...if they embrace...AS they re-embrace that NEW IDENTITY...they learn a new way to be human and they receive a new clarity in all the most important relationships in their lives.

How are relationships clarified by the Gospel? That's the focus of Peter's words in this COMPENDIUM or summary of all YOUR relationships... What does Christianity say about our relating to God...to one another...and to the outside world? The UPWARD, the INWARD and the OUTWARD relationships.

When it comes to relating to God... the Apostle wants these young Christians to marvel at grace.

They have gone from death to life. Our whole race was dead because of the Fall...we all inherited the death of Adam. "In the day you eat it YOU shall surely die"...THAT WAS OUR STORY! But God stepped in and He "tabernacled" among us (remember?!) and in Jesus Christ's resurrection (1.3) death has been reversed... the death of death has begun!

"And YOU" ...says Peter, "have tasted the Age that is coming...the Age when death is no more!"

It should make you look in the mirror and ask, "Who ME?!" ... And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood?

Kris Kristofferson wrote a song that Johnny Cash made famous called, "Why Me, Lord?" ...and it's not a blues song asking, "what have I done to deserve all the bad stuff in my life"...but the opposite... "Why has the grace of God found ME out?"

And Peter uses that dynamic with these young believers who may not be seeing life get easier for them since they've begun to believe in Jesus Christ.

He says, "But realize...keep believing...what you have only now begun to taste...that death will not hold you...that God is no longer angry with you...that you are no longer guilty in His sight...BUT THAT GOD HAS STEPPED INTO HUMAN HISTORY TO RETRIEVE YOU and claim you and ADOPT YOU AS HIS OWN child!..."

YOU...of all people have recognized the surpassing value of who Jesus Christ is...to many people...even to the experts in Jerusalem who (of ALL people!) should have seen that THIS is the awaited Messiah... even the experts missed it...BUT YOU! (of all people YOU!)... God's Spirit brought you to life and gave to eyes to see that Jesus Christ is the Foundation and the start/finish of God's plan to rescue a NEW HUMANITY...YOU see it...and have actually experienced it...have tasted it! Can it be?!

The people who were MOST likely to succeed (spiritually!) threw away this Jesus like He was an old broken cinder-block ("He's a criminal and a loser...crucified like the worst kind of criminal [think today of what are the worst kinds of criminals...THAT'S how the experts thought of Jesus Christ])...BUT YOU HAVE SEEN, "No! He is suffering for MY crimes...He is dying for ME!" ...

You have seen...what a wonder, a beauty, a UNIQUE TREASURE He is... "Behold! I lay in Zion a choice Stone...a precious Cornerstone..."

And for Peter...and for the other writers...THIS is THE KEY to the Christian's relationship with God (and the key to all other relationships TOO!) – God has given life to the dead...God has given grace to the undeserving ...and if we could only stop at the start of each day...and look in the mirror and ask "Who? ME?!"... and then "Behold...this precious Stone" (marvel at Him...) Believing THAT changes everything.

And as you GOT that News and God gave you eyes to see it and believe it ...and even taste it...NOW, the most important thing you can do in your UPWARD relationship is to drink MORE and more of this life-giving message.... "Like NEWBORN babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (2.2)

This is the message that brings you to life and that will nourish you all your days...you'll NEVER outgrow it...the Good News will always be what you need. It changes everything...so keep coming and drinking it in.

And among the things it changes MOST profoundly is the way I think of myself...in relation to YOU, the people who believe this WITH me.

This letter was circulated among people most of whom had been Gentiles...but were also probably connected to a local synagogue (what ancient Jewish people called "God-fearing people").

And Peter says to them...and to US: God came into the world in Jesus Christ to re-construct the human race... Jesus Christ, the God-Man, is the Foundation and Basis, the Living Stone of the New Temple God is building. And WE...those who believe this message, WE are also living stones in the Temple where God dwells on Planet Earth.

We are the True Israel of God...you may have been a Gentile...a stranger to God's grace and promises and the privileges that belonged to Abraham's people... but NOW...you are JUST as much connected to God as Abraham himself...

All the titles and designations and terms of endearment that God lavished on the Israelites in Moses' day...are YOURS. This is my new identity...and O U R new identity!

But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY. (2.9-10)

See? This means everything! It's my new self-image, more important than any traditional, conservative way of identifying me...more important than my achievements ... than my parentage/pedigree ...my gender... my job...my family...my record.

AND more important than any progressive or liberal assessment of me...more important than my feelings about who I am.

This is God...changing my name...changing my identity and situating me in a family ...in a movement ...a building, a Temple. Once I was alienated from God and alienated from YOU... now I am God's own possession, a recipient of mercy. AND...to this person, a fellow believer...sitting next to me in the pew today...whose name I just learned (if I still remember it...was it Ken or Chuck?) to this fellow believer I've never met who (I suppose he attends the OTHER service)... to HIM I AM A BROTHER.

We are bricks in the New Temple...where God is dwelling/tabernacling (remember?!) ...we have very different stories...grew up thousands of miles apart. He is white-collar...I am blue-collar... I am Classical... he is rock-n-roll... She is very Anglo-proper...in my family we were sort of "Big Fat Greek Wedding" ... she is old...I am young...they are poor ...I am rich...

But I am learning that BECAUSE of God's doing... because of Jesus Christ...this person, whose name I just learned...is my brother.

"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" (1.22)

We were born of different Mothers...but NOW born again of the same Father...and the Church has become our Mother... I just learned his name...at this family reunion...but I'd better get busy in getting to know him...to fervently love one another from the heart...THIS IS OUR MUTUAL CALLING...and a holy calling it is.

The world is on fire...our very nation is ON FIRE. There is so much anger...hostility... malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander... and the world is DYING to see people who fervently love one another from the heart.

And WE are... IN committing to Jesus Christ...we are committing to one another...it's NOT EITHER/OR ...it can ONLY be BOTH/AND...

And Peter is, of course, very aware that the world is watching us. We are not living in some private spiritual journey... where it's me and God/Jesus and I don't get involved with organized religion or the politics of the church (that's a self-righteous cop-out and it is NOT an option according to Peter's compendium and the rest of the Bible!) Living Stones fitted TOGETHER into a Living Temple...TOGETHER!

And we are also NOT retreating together into a monastery or commune but are...exiles...visitors...not OF the world but definitely IN the world. And Peter includes, in his relational compendium, this OUTWARD-FACING dynamic:

(2.12) "Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation."

We face UP...and are received by grace (Why ME?)

We face IN...a new self-image and identity...and a new family...called to be a New Humanity... fervently loving one another from the heart. Withdrawal from one another is NOT an option.

And we face OUT...we are concerned for our neighbors... seeking the shalom of the City where God has exiled us (Jer 29.4-7)... as the True Israel of God we are praying for the Gentiles in our own homes...in our work place...schools... neighborhoods.

As a priestly-people (a royal priesthood) we are standing in the gap... doing good in the world...pooling our gifts...our money...time...looking for ways to lay down our lives. Why? Because we want God to be famous...want this Savior to be known. That they may, "glorify God in the day of visitation", might say in the last day, "Lord, thank You for Your people...they reached me...they pointed to You!"

Hallelujah...what a Savior...everybody ought to know Him...He deserves every knee to bow to Him...Man of Sorrows what a name!... for the Son of God who came, ruined sinners to reclaim. Hallelujah! What a Savior." (PRAY)

The Communion

1.3.16

...like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord. And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, (2.2-4)

Coming to Him... coming for the pure milk of the Gospel...hearing it...tasting it...that's why we keep coming...and keep coming.

At one point in the NT there's a distinction between milk and meat (Heb. 5)...but THE EMPHASIS HERE is on our staying hungry for the same Source...the benefits of salvation grow/show up in us as we return to the Gospel again and again...never outliving our need of God's grace in Jesus Christ...always thirsty and ...always supplied!

Supplied with what? Supplied with that same grace that brought us to life...it is our milk...our nourishment. It has power...it can enable us to love one another fervently from the heart ...coming again to the Living Stone we receive it.

In silence...express your desire to receive Him (PRAY)