

Dear Friends,

The longer I study my Bible the more I realize that the pattern of New Testament teaching is to integrate profound doctrinal truth with pure Christian living. Separating the two is fraught with problems from errantly concluding salvation by works, not grace, on one side to a near casual neglect of New Testament Christian ethics on the other. We see both unchristian behaviors rampant in today's culture.

In our study passage for this week, Peter begins with a pointed lesson on believers treating each other with "unfeigned" and "fervent" love, love in action. He builds his basis for this high Christian ethic on the bedrock truth of our standing and eternal blessings in Jesus. If we have received so much from Him, and if, by His work for and in us, we belong to His family, we are morally obligated to treat other "Family" members with His ethic, as He treats them.

Folks, I've been trying to preach for "Going on" sixty-eight years. A preacher who pastors churches must be a thorough and careful "People watcher." I fearfully observe more abandonment of Christian ethics today than in all those years. It appears commonly in how Christian people treat or talk about other Christian people who do not share their political or worldview beliefs. This divisive and unloving conduct more exemplifies the mirror opposite of what Jesus taught both by example and word in John 13, as well as what Peter taught in our study passage for this week. Shouldn't Jesus and Scripture define our worldview more than politics or worldviews built on suspicion and human carnality?

We belong to the same family, the family of God, and we enjoy that family relationship by what Jesus did for us. Therefore, how does the New Testament teach us to treat each other? Think of each other? Peter answers the question in our study passage. Paul answers the question in 1 Corinthians 13. And John answers it in the entire letter of 1 John.

To borrow John's strong words in 1 John chapters 3 and 4, however we choose to regard and treat other believers mirrors exactly how we regard and treat the Lord. If we criticize our brothers and sisters in Christ, if we regard them with suspicion and distrust, our conduct toward them tells us emphatically that we also criticize the Lord if we perceive Him as teaching differently from our ideas, we treat Him with suspicion and distrust. Strong words? Read them in 1 John 4.

Lord help us to abandon this world and its infectious invasion of our faith. Lord help us to rediscover the purifying vitality of loving the Lord with unfeigned fervent love, so much so that we return to loving His people in that same way.

Love in Jesus,
Joe Holder

The Most Important Obligation of a Born-Again Person

Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently: Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you. (1 Peter 1:22-25 KJV 1900)

Before examining Peter's first thought, let's study the second briefly. **Being born again.** The verb in this quote is perfect tense, meaning it describes an action that is completed already, so it occurred in the past and continues in the present. Occasionally folks who believe in the personal salvation experience (New birth) by their conduct will focus on Peter's first point and think it refers to a believer purifying his soul as the new birth. But this interpretation contradicts Peter's second point. If we read the lesson with consistency, we learn that those who are commanded to "Purify" their souls in obeying the truth are in fact people who have already been born again. Purifying our souls then refers to the godly conduct of an already born-again person. It commands a high ethical lifestyle in every born-again person.

Another key factor that affirms this thought. "Purifying" is an active voice verb. It means you and I do the purifying. In contrast, "Being born again" is in the passive voice, meaning we did nothing to cause or contribute to this action. We were born again by the action of another. When Jesus taught Nicodemus the most thorough lesson in the New Testament on "Being born again," He used a word which means "From above." He further taught Nicodemus that being born again must occur prior to a person either seeing or entering the Kingdom of God.

Occasionally you will hear people interpret being born again as God giving a believer a fresh start, a "New beginning." However, a quick review of fourteen respected New Testament Greek dictionaries (No, I do not read Greek. My source is Logos Bible software which lists these resources and their definition of the word) all uniformly define the word as the imparting of a new life. Not one resource defined the word as a fresh start. Jesus coined the word in His teaching Nicodemus, and He clearly intended to teach the respected rabbi how one's spiritual life, his very existence in God's spiritual family, occurs. In our study lesson, Peter affirms the same thought.

...not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away. The beginning of our spiritual life is the result of something God does for and in us that Peter describes as "incorruptible." It is not corrupt, and it cannot be corrupted. As the countless denominations testify, the gospel can be corrupted, and it has been corrupted. But the "Word" of God which Peter here describes is not corrupt, and it cannot be corrupted.

...by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. Peter is quite specific in his emphasis. Our new birth is the result of the "word of God." He further describes this "word of God" as living and eternal, "Abideth for ever." Although the common interpretation of this lesson is that this "word of God" is the gospel, Peter's language does not support this idea.

As much as I love and respect my Bible, I cannot factually or logically say it is "Living." Occasionally our Christian friends who believe in a more human centric gospel will link this lesson with Paul's words in Hebrews 4, also claiming Paul intended Scripture or the gospel in that lesson. Rather than quote the single verse in question, I cite below Paul's wider context.

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do. Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:12-15 KJV)

If we isolate Verse 12 from this context, we might think our friends are correct. However, Paul's contextual teaching affirms the same point that Peter makes in our study passage. Although the functional ability of the "Word of God" in Verse 12 far exceeds the ability of Scripture, the last point in the verse may be the strongest. **"...is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."** Louw-Nida's dictionary of New Testament words defines "Discerner" as "...the ability or capacity to judge legal cases." Only Jesus possesses this ability. I was once called to testify in a legal case in which I had personal knowledge of the events. Despite the facts, and sadly, because the person on trial had a better lawyer, the jury decided wrongly, against the facts. During my testimony, I read the judge as understanding the truth of the case, but he was not the jury. No written document, even a Bible, has that dynamic ability. However, Jesus, the eternal Word of God, cannot be deceived by personality or by smooth convincing, though errant, words. He always knows the deepest thoughts of the heart of men.

But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man. (John 2:24-25 KJV)

Further, in the Hebrews 4 passage, Paul refers to the “word of God” repeatedly in the context with personal pronouns, “he” and “him.” He erases all reasonable doubt when he identifies this “word of God” as our “...**great high priest.**” Much as I love it, my Bible is not my “**great high priest.**” Only Jesus, the living “Word of God,” occupies that position.

Our study passage describes the “word of God” in similar words. ...**the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.** Peter and Paul comfortably agree. In both passages, the “Word of God” to whom they refer is living, alive. And Peter adds that this Word “...**abideth for ever.**”

Peter continues to affirm this high view of Jesus as the living “Word of God.” **And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.** A wise preacher who fulfills his divine charge should always—and only—preach from the Scriptures. However, the object of Biblical preaching is not the Bible, but the living “Word of God,” Jesus whom the Bible teaches.

For those who read old commentaries, if one reads John Gill’s commentary, it would be easy to think that Gill believed in the gospel as the power by which the new birth occurs. However, in his later systematic theology text, “Body of Divinity,” in the section dealing with the new birth, Gill quotes this passage from 1 Peter and distinctly interprets the “Word of God” as Jesus, the living, eternal Word of God.

And this is the word. ... I sincerely do not understand how folks interpret this sentence as the gospel. When we preach the gospel, do we magnify the gospel? Or do we magnify Jesus? A message that focuses on the gospel is liable to ignore Jesus. A gospel that, beginning to end, magnifies Jesus fulfills this truth. A personal question to preachers. If we are not preaching Jesus in our sermons, why are we preaching? What are we preaching? Instead of preaching a “What” gospel, we should preach a “Whom” gospel. Preach Jesus. And that is Peter’s teaching.

Now let’s go back to the first point Peter teaches in our study passage, a point that rests on the foundation of all we have studied above.

Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently. The correct objective of the Christian life is all focused on the chief objective of “**unfeigned love of the brethren.**” 1 John thoroughly teaches that our love of our fellow-believers and our love of the Lord are united. Whatever we think or do toward one reflects how we think of the other. We can’t say we love God but think or treat each other with contempt or suspicion. Factually, John confronts us; if we live in contempt of our brothers and sisters in Christ, we also have contempt for God, regardless our claim to love Him.

Unfeigned love means that our love for each other is to be sincere and without pretense. We don’t talk to each other with grace and respect but criticize unmercifully when not in their presence. What we say about them should be the same as what we say to them. If we speak to each other with the appearance of love, our Biblical commandment is to speak about them with the same love. How do I know if I have this unfeigned love for the Lord’s people? How do I treat them? How do I talk about them when they are not around? How do I regard them, agree with me or not? Suppose they have different political leanings from me? Do I join the present insanity of hate and think of them or treat them lowly? Or do I love them regardless of their politics or their world view?

...**see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently.** The King James translators were the most honest of Bible translators. When a text in the Greek language didn’t mesh with English literally form, they supplied words which they regarded as best communicating the Greek thought. And they put all supplied words in italics so the reader would know. In this verse, “see that ye” appears in italics. Peter’s teaching is direct and simple. Just as Jesus taught in John 13 and John affirmed in 1 John, Peter frames our loving other believers as a commandment, not as an optional good idea. And the translators rightly communicated the weight of the thought, “See that ye” do it.

In the New Testament, as well as the Old, “Love” is taught as a moral obligation, not so much as an emotion. If we “Love” someone, we are morally obligated to show that love in our conduct toward them—and about them. In John 13, after both Passover and instituting the Communion, the Lord’s Supper, Jesus taught in word what He just communicated in action by washing the disciples’ feet. He is our example. Further, in John 13:34, He underscored His point. “**A new commandment**” which He gave was for His disciples to love one another. If we follow Jesus’ example and teaching, we shall manifest in conduct what we often say in words, that we love the Lord’s people.

With a pure heart. A general definition of “Pure” in this phrase might be “Ritual” purity. For example, under the Mosaic Code, certain situations or conduct rendered a person ritually unclean or impure. They could not participate in formal worship. In some cases, they were also quarantined. They could not associate with others during their quarantine. I prefer a more specific idea. “Pure” in the eyes of God. To deem ourselves pure in our own eyes or imagination means nothing. Does God regard our person or conduct pure from His holy perspective? Applied to Peter’s exhortation, we treat fellow-believers with the God-kind of love, a quality of both emotion and action that He approves.

“fervently.” Think of various things we do. If we love what we do, we approach it eagerly. We would gladly do it every day. If we dislike a task, we put it off, dread it, and reluctantly do it. To love other believers “Fervently” means that we love them eagerly and with enthusiasm. We look for occasions to do things that affirm this godly, literally, God-approved love in action for them.

This, my friends, is the conduct that Peter taught with the firm, **“See that ye...”** do it. Amen.

Elder Joe Holder