

Our Family: The New Community

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. First letter of Peter, starting on verse 22.

Now that you've purified yourself 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 by perishable seed, but by imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

Therefore rid yourself of all malice and 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've tasted the Lord is good. As you come to him, the living stone, rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

[1 : 25] For in scripture it says, See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.

Now, to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. And the stone that causes people to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall, they stumble because they disobey the message, which is also what they were destined for.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are a people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which weighs war against your soul.

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

[2 : 36] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Good morning, Christ Church. The week before last, Andrew and Catherine and I had the opportunity to go to New York City together, and we hope that maybe Chelsea can join us next time.

But we enjoyed having conversations there with different pastors and professors and practitioners from all over the country, New York, Chicago, D.C., L.A., the United Kingdom.

And we were...one of the questions we were wrestling with together was, how do we communicate the gospel effectively in our post-Christian context? How do we communicate the gospel effectively in our post-Christian context?

And one of the shared assumptions in those conversations is that we need stronger churches in order to be able to do that, that we need congregations that are full of men and women who really believe the gospel and are living by the gospel and are embodying the gospel in their life together, and that the best way for people to hear the gospel is to do so within the context of a gospel-saturated church community that's really clear about her identity and her mission and the source of her power.

And so, as I think about those conversations we've been having and as I come to this text again in 1 Peter, these three questions emerge for me along these lines.

[4 : 16] The first question is just, what is the church? What in the world is the church? Secondly, how do we relate to our culture?

How should the church relate to our broader culture? And then thirdly, how do we get the power to live like Christ? How does power come into the church?

So those are the three questions I want to explore this morning. What is the church? How do we relate to our culture and where do we get the power to live like Christ? So first of all, what is the church?

And I think this is important because many Christians in North America today are increasingly ambivalent about the church. They could kind of take or leave the church. Many have chosen to leave the church in what's been called the great de-churching.

Others have decided to stay in the church but sort of sit loose to it and participate at their own convenience. And we could trot out many, many examples of how the church today is being reshaped by forces of individualism and consumerism in what I would say are very negative patterns.

[5 : 22] But I want to think about Peter because Peter was there in that moment in Matthew chapter 16 where Jesus said to Peter and to the rest of the apostles, he said, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

It's a very strong statement. Peter heard it directly. I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against my church. And that made a deep impression not only on Peter but upon all the apostles.

And so in their writings we get these metaphors of how important the church is to Jesus Christ. They say that the church is the body and Christ is the head.

The church is the bride and Christ is the groom. The church is the flock and Christ is the shepherd. And Peter adds into this mix of metaphors just three more today to tell us about the importance of the church.

And we're not going to have time to fully explore them in depth but I do want to just put them before you because I want to suggest that if we come to embrace this really high vision of what the church is in the eyes of Christ then we'll be much more equipped to sort of reverse the forces of individualism and consumerism that are at work on and in the church today.

[6 : 41] And what Peter says first of all, he says, if you're part of the church you belong to the new family. You belong to the new family of God. Look at verse 22 of chapter 1.

He says, Now that you've purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other love one another deeply from the heart. And then in verse 2 of the next chapter he says, Like newborn babies crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.

And we recognize here the kind of things we expect to find in families. Newborn babies who are crying out for food. Brothers and sisters who are learning how to love each other from the heart.

And how do these babies, how do these brothers and sisters in this family become part of the family in the first place? Well, Peter says in verse 23 that they're born again of God the Father.

They're born again by the imperishable seed of the word of the gospel. You can't be in this family of the Father without being born again, Peter says.

[7 : 51] And he says this at the very beginning of the letter. Praise be to God the Father who's given us new birth into a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So I say this because many people go to church and attend Sunday services but they've not yet experienced the new birth.

They've not yet been born again. And how do you know whether or not the Father has begotten you into his family? Well, Peter says here's a test. Are you like a baby who longs for the spiritual milk of God's grace and God's truth?

That's kind of one way you know that you're part of this family. Or are you like a brother or a sister who loves the rest of the family sincerely and earnestly and from the heart?

That's another test to know whether or not you're part of the family of God. But Peter says not only if you're part of the church, you're not only part of this new family. He goes on and he says you're part of the new temple.

You're part of the new temple. Now he changes metaphors quickly so you've got to kind of be an agile reader. But he says in verse 5, he says, You also like living stones are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

[9 : 09] Now we all know that the material house of God that was built with inanimate stones was that great temple in the heart of Jerusalem. And what Peter is saying here is that God is actually building a new temple.

He's building a spiritual house where the Holy Spirit can dwell. And he says that you are the animated stones. You are the living stones that are being built into this house in some kind of interlocking interdependence with one another.

And what Peter is telling us here is that the church is not merely a building where we go on a Sunday morning, but the church is rather this 24-7 community of living and breathing stones. And that within this spiritual house of the Holy Spirit, there's a holy priesthood that exists. And that every Christian is a priest, offering not the physical sacrifices of lambs and goats and whatnot, but offering spiritual sacrifices of ourselves, of our lives, of our time and our energy and our resources, not just on Sundays, but Monday through Saturday and all that we do.

You're following. Peter says if you're part of the church, you're part of this new family, you're part of the new temple. And then he goes on and he says you belong to the new Israel. You belong to the new Israel.

[10:39] Verse 9, he says this. He says, But you're a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. Now, Peter, of course, is a Jewish Christian, and this passage is just saturated with the largest collection of Old Testament images anywhere in the New Testament, and he's just piling up title upon title upon title that was given to Israel in the books of Exodus, Psalms, Isaiah, Hosea, and he's actually applying them to us.

And he says, You all are a chosen people. You've been elected by God to showcase his salvation to the world. And then he says, You're a royal priesthood, and that means that the king of the universe wants to use you to bring people into his presence, and that the sovereign Lord wants to, through you, mediate his blessings and his glory to all the peoples of the earth.

He says, You're a holy nation. And we talked about that word holy a couple weeks ago, that you're a set-apart culture, set-apart to reflect the moral beauty and the character of God's excellence in your life together.

And then he says, You're God's special possession. In the ancient Near East, the kings, they had their own, they had a bunch of wealth, and then they had their own private wealth. They had these special objects of beauty, these treasures that they would keep in their palace, and that they delighted in in a special and a higher way.

And Peter says, That's what you are to God. And so what is the primary task of this new Israel? If you've been called to be part of the new Israel, what is the primary task of the people of God?

[12:28] What are we here for? What are we supposed to do? Well, Peter interestingly says that our doing flows out of our being. That what we do flows out of who we are and what God has made it possible for us to be.

And he says this in verse 9. He says, You've been made all these things that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.

Of course, we can only do that if we've been actually called by the gracious Lord. Just as He called Lazarus out of His tomb, and Lazarus walked out of the darkness of His grave into the light of day, so He must call us out of the darkness of death and into the light of life.

But if you have received that call of God, then our primary task as the new Israel, the new people of God, is one of declaration. As Andrew said earlier, we're to be declaring the praises, declaring the excellencies of who God is and what God has done.

And what that means is that the primary task of the church is for us to be telling our family, our friends, our neighbors, and our coworkers about this amazing God and what He's done to make it possible for us to be included in and to belong to His chosen people and His royal priesthood and His holy nation and His treasured possession through His Son, Jesus Christ.

[14:04] So, what is the church? If you've fallen asleep, this is the time to wake up. What is the church? The church is the new family where people are being born again as babies who crave the gospel of grace and who are growing up within that family to love their brothers and sisters like God the Father loves us.

And the church is this new temple, this spiritual house of the Holy Spirit with living stones and a priestly community that offers 24-7, Sunday to Saturday, spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable and pleasing to God.

And the church is this new Israel whose primary task is to evangelize our neighborhoods and our networks by declaring the praises of the One who called us out of the darkness and into His marvelous light.

Now, that is not a low view of the church. That's an exceedingly high, high, high view of the church. And the question for us is, do we share that vision? And are we committing ourselves to embodying that amazing vision of the church?

So that's question one. What is the church? Question two is, how do we as a church relate to our culture? How should the church relate to our culture?

[15 : 21] Now, again, Peter is sharing with us not just his own ideas. He's sharing with us the vision that Jesus gave to him and the other apostles that the church is meant to be this nonconformist counterculture that seeks a missionary encounter with our culture.

And here's where I get that in verse 11. Peter says, Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul.

Now, the controlling theme of this whole letter is that we are Christians, are exiles who are scattered. That's the very first line of the letter. Peter says in chapter 1, verse 17, that we're to live our time as foreigners in reverent fear.

And he says at the end of the letter that he's writing from Babylon, the place of exile par excellence. That Peter's saying, I'm in exile, you're in exile. And if the church's basic identity is that we are the exiled people of God, then how is it that we should live as resident aliens in a culture that's not our own?

How are we to engage with the values and the practices of our culture? Now, I think we have a slide. If we can pull that up. This is something that I told you about the very first week we introduced this series.

[16 : 44] And perhaps maybe one of you forgot what I said. Maybe one of you wasn't here. So I'm going to remind you too that we can find many churches and Christians today who, their goal is to transform our culture.

They see that our culture is in decline. And so they say, let's seek political power. Let's rectify this decline by imposing Christian beliefs and practices on an unwilling populace.

And then other Christians and churches say, well, no, let's not transform the culture. Let's seek to assimilate to the culture. Let's align ourselves with different movements of justice and liberation movements so that we can be seen to be on the right side of history.

Other people say, well, let's not try to transform the culture or assimilate to the culture. But let's just withdraw from our culture and retreat into this strong, tight-knit, sheltered community with very little connection to the rest of our society so that we can avoid being polluted by it.

And then other Christians and churches say, well, no, let's just ignore culture altogether and let's just build up the church and win people to Jesus and leave the culture to just take care of itself and stew in its own juices.

[17 : 51] Now, Peter wrote this letter in order to help the church avoid all of these unbalanced excesses that we might be prone to.

Being defensive against, being relevant to, being purified from, being unconcerned about our culture. And rather what Peter's encouraging us to do is to be Christian exiles who are distinctively and faithfully present within our culture.

That just as God in Jesus Christ became fully and faithfully present among us and offered His life to us, that's what the church is to do for the world. And I want to show you this missionary dynamic in our text.

If you'll look at verse 11, Peter says, Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul. He says, look at all those sinful desires and all those passions of the flesh that are inside of you and on display all around you.

Think about the greed for more money or the lust for more sex or pride in the pursuit of more power. He says, do you see yourself in a battle with these things?

[19 : 07] Do you see yourself as someone who has spiritual powers that are waging war against your soul and seeking to gain your allegiance, seeking dominion over you?

Are you tempted to assimilate to all those sinful desires of our culture? Are you tempted to just go with the flow and fit in with the crowd and win people's approval?

And if that's you, Peter says, you need to abstain. You as the people of God, this holy nation, this chosen people, this royal priesthood, you need to learn how to practice self-control.

And to say this two-letter sentence, N-O. No. Greed, no. Lust, no.

Pride, no. But, Peter says, abstaining is only one part of our missionary dynamic. And don't misinterpret not assimilating with our culture, with this posture of withdrawing from and ignoring our culture.

[20 : 10] Because Peter goes on in verse 12 and he says, Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

He's saying you, the church, need to stay connected with all of your unbelieving coworkers and friends and neighbors. And you need to be faithfully present to them, living as salt and light among them, getting close enough to them to live out before them an authentic and genuine human life that God has called us to live.

And when you do that, both individually and collectively, you're going to be both offensive and attractive. Because when you abstain, as verse 11 says, you're going to offend people.

And when you do good deeds, as verse 12 says, you're going to attract people. And people basically just won't know what to do with you. You will defy their categories.

They're going to look upon you with suspicion and say, you're like a foreigner to us. Why don't you adopt our values? Why don't you adopt our customs and our practices? But other people are going to look at you and they're going to be won over because they see in your deeds integrity and consistency.

[21 : 25] And they're going to find that incredibly attractive. Now what, oh man, I'm running out of time. What are the lives, what are the good lives that Peter imagines the church living out in front of our pagan neighbors?

Well, I just finished a great book by a scholar named Larry Hurtado. And he wrote this right before he died in 2016. It's called *Destroyer of the Gods, Early Christian Distinctives in the Roman World*. And basically he says there that the early church engaged in a Christian social project. They were seeking to be this unique kind of human community that defied categories. And that project had at least five elements that they considered good lives among the pagans.

The first element was multi-ethnicity and equality between the races. They said, well, we have this common identity in Jesus Christ that's more fundamental to our racial identities.

Those are important, but they've all been relativized by the fact that we're one in Jesus Christ. The second aspect of this social project is that they were unusually generous with their money.

[22 : 31] They were highly committed to caring for the weak and the poor and the marginalized. Not just of their own group, but of all peoples of all backgrounds. And they were giving their money away to do this.

The third thing about this social project is that they were non-retaliatory. They were marked by a commitment to forgiveness. Especially toward the people who were criticizing them and excluding them.

They committed to be bridge builders and peacemakers. The fourth aspect of this Christian social project is that they were strongly and practically against the discarding of unwanted babies.

Either through abortion or more likely through infant exposure. Mostly kids, but mostly girls were thrown out in these garbage heaps and left to die or taken into slavery and prostitution.

And the Christian said, no, let's rescue them and bring them into our church family. And the fifth aspect of their social project is that they were revolutionary regarding the ethics of sex.

[23 : 31] And that they prohibited all sex outside of marriage between a man and a woman. And they basically said to themselves and to their culture that sex is not an irresistible appetite.

But it's a way to imitate the God who gave himself to us in Jesus Christ. Now each of these five practices that they considered good lives among the pagans in the first, second, and third centuries. Were there because the Christians had a high view of the Bible's authority and the lordship of Jesus. And the first two of those practices, ethnic diversity and caring for the poor, they sound kind of like liberal emphases, don't they?

And then the last two of those practices, sanctity of life and sexual ethics, sound kind of like conservative emphases, don't they? But then the third practice of non-retaliation and forgiveness sounds like no particular party on offer today.

And you may be aware that churches are under enormous pressure today to jettison either the first two or the last two of these practices.

[24 : 39] And not to keep them all. And yet to give up on any one of these would make Christianity the handmaid of a particular political program. And would undermine our missionary encounter with our culture.

And so what Peter's telling us in verses 11 to 12, he's giving us a summary of the original missionary dynamic that's both offensive and attractive.

Where some people outside of the church are going to accuse Christians of you're doing wrong, you're actually doing evil with these practices. And yet some people are going to look at the church and say, well I see your good deeds and I think I'm going to start glorifying God.

You see earliest Christians were widely ridiculed as a threat to the social order because they just didn't honor all the deities and all the identities that were on offer to them.

They were seen as exclusive, as narrow, as strange. And yet people were flocking to the church. People especially in the urban centers of the Roman Empire were like, we've never seen anything like this.

[25 : 45] And I just want to encourage us that if we were to commit ourselves to these same category defying, dogged adherence to the biblical gospel in all of its fullness.

That we too, in our own day, would be this distinctively and faithfully present church within our culture. The salt that our culture needs.

The light that our culture needs. And it's my personal and pastoral experience that everything I just told you is extremely hard to do. It's very, very hard to hold this tension and to walk this line.

And so where do we get the power to do it? It's my last point. Do I have a little permission to go a little longer? Okay. So what is the church? How do we relate to our culture?

But then finally, if we're to do, have this basically almost impossible missionary posture and missionary encounter with our culture, where do we get the power to do it? Where do we get the power to live like Christ?

[26 : 54] Well, Peter says in verse 4, he says, Come to Him, the living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen by God and precious to Him.

And then in verse 6 he says, For in Scripture it says, See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious stone, and the one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame. One of the largest building blocks in the world is called the Western Stone.

Some of us have been to see it. It's part of the foundation in the temple in Jerusalem, one of the great wonders of the ancient world. And this stone is 45 feet long, 11 feet high, and 8 feet wide. It weighs over 300 tons. So just imagine a shipping container. That's the size of the stone. And in the Old Testament, God was often called the stone of Israel, the rock of Israel.

And so why is Peter bringing up this massive, magnificent stone for us? Why is he telling these suffering Christians who are in circumstances that are incredibly insecure and unstable and unshaky about this solid rock and this immovable cornerstone?

[28 : 12] Why is he telling these Christians who are being dishonored and rejected because they're following the way of Jesus, why is he telling them about this stone that's rejected by people in their building projects, but is actually chosen and precious and honored by God in His building project?

And why is Peter telling these Christians who, as he says in chapter 1 verse 6, they're suffering grief and all kinds of trials because of their commitment to Jesus and the way of Jesus? Why is he telling these Christians who are facing the prospect of alienation and exclusion and persecution and even death, that this stone is not a dead stone but a living stone?

And that this stone is not dead, he's full of abundant life, as if any other stone that touches this living stone will itself become fully and forever alive.

Why does Peter want us to know about this living stone? And why does he want us to build our lives on this living stone? Peter's essentially saying, look, everybody is involved in a building project.

Everybody you meet is building their life, they're building their identity, they're building their future, they're building their family, they're building their community on some kind of cornerstone. And Peter's saying that when Jesus was evaluated by people as a potential cornerstone upon which to build their lives, he was judged unworthy and unwanted.

[29 : 44] People said, nah, we'd rather build on a different stone, a different foundation. Jesus was put to shame, Peter says. Jesus was dishonored.

He was deemed as not precious and rejected. And we shouldn't be surprised that the same thing is happening today. That people are saying, you know, I'd rather build my life on my work and career

success and my professional status.

I'd rather build my life on my body and my lifestyle preferences and well-being. I'd rather build my life on my romance and a sense of adventure, travel the world. I'd rather live my life and build my life upon my family and the accomplishments of my children.

And I think if Peter were here today, he'd say, that is a terribly insecure and unstable and shaky building project that you're working on there.

But he would say, I want you to look at how God the Father chose to build. Because when God the Father wanted to build a new creation, when He wanted to build a new humanity, when He set about to build a new family and a new temple and a new Israel, He looked at His Son Jesus and He said, this is it.

[31 : 03] This is the cornerstone. This is the foundation stone. And God said, I choose Him. I honor Him as most precious and most valuable to me.

Yes, He will be rejected. Yes, He will be dishonored. Yes, He will be humiliated. And He will be put to shame on His cross. He'll be treated like an exile and a foreigner.

He will suffer grief and all kinds of trials because of His faithfulness to God. He will go through the fiery furnace of being rejected by His culture. But I'm going to raise Him up, the Father says.

I'm going to give Him victory over sin and death. I'm going to make Him that resurrected and living stone. I'm going to give to Jesus imperishable life, indestructible life, everlasting life.

And He will be the living foundation of the new creation and the new humanity. And everyone who builds on Him will come alive.

[32 : 09] All who trust in Him will be like living stones. And they'll never be put to shame. In fact, the exact opposite will happen to them. Their rejection will turn into vindication.

Just as Jesus' rejection turn into vindication. Friends, if your life is built on this living stone, then death can only do to you what it did to Jesus.

And if your life is built on this living stone, then you can only be shaken as much as Jesus was shaken. And if Jesus was not ultimately put to shame, but was in fact put in the most honored place, then so it will be for you and for all those who build their lives on Him.

So Peter says in verse 4, come to Jesus. He says in verse 6, trust in Jesus. Build your life on Jesus. In union with Jesus. Join to Jesus. Spending time with Jesus. Let Jesus become as precious to you as He is precious to God the Father.

[33 : 27] And let the life of this living stone flow into you. And let the strength and the substance of Jesus become your strength and your substance.

And Peter says if you do this, if you build your life this way, you'll share in the chosenness of Jesus. You'll share in His preciousness before God.

You'll share in the eternal stability and honor that's been given to Jesus. So friends, do you want to be a part of God's grand building project here on earth that is going to endure beyond death and on into eternity?

Do you want to be a part of that? The Apostle Peter says, come to Jesus. Trust in Jesus. Become a living stone built on the living cornerstone that is Jesus.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[34 : 42] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.