

Abstinence and Attraction

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- [0 : 0 0] We're going to continue our studies this evening in 1 Peter. If you'll turn with me, please, to 1 Peter 2, and looking tonight at verses 11 to 12.
- 1 Peter 2, verses 11 and 12. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.
- Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.
- The divisions that we have in our English translation here are not necessarily following the actual divisions that you find in the Greek text of 1 Peter.
- And here at verse 11, we're actually beginning the second part of the first letter of Peter.
- [1 : 1 2] If we divide it into two parts, then the first part is obviously the verses prior to this, down as far as chapter 2, verse 10. And now from chapter 2, verse 11, through to the end of the epistle, we're coming into the second part of Peter's letter.
- Remember, in the first part, we've been looking at it in some detail, and we've seen that it contains some practical passages, but mainly they are theological passages.
- Short theological passages, but... Sorry, short practical passages, but longer theological passages.
- When you come into the second part, Peter reverses that somewhat, because what you now find through to the end of the letter is that he's dealing mainly with practical matters that are important for us in our actual life situation in this world, in our human experiences, in different experiences as we have them from day to day.
- And instead of having short applications and longer theological passages, what you find now is shorter theological passages, but closely connected to them, longer practical passages or passages where the theology of these shorter passages is actually applied to our everyday lives.
- [2 : 3 6] And in verses 11 and 12, the two things we find, and we'll see that they're very closely connected together, is first of all, an appeal for abstinence, for abstinence from sinful desires.
- That's what you find in verse 11. I urge you, beloved, as sojourners and exiles, to abstain from the passions of the flesh. And then in verse 12, he moves to looking at attracting the world's attentions.
- He looks more to the setting publicly in which we're placed as God's people and how that has a bearing on those around us who aren't themselves Christians or don't belong to the church and are outside of the church.
- And he's looking at the connection that we have in the way we live our lives of abstinence from sinful desires to the way that that attracts the attention of that world outside.
- And we'll see that it's with a specific purpose. And the specific purpose, actually, is in their conversion. So there's a very strong evangelistic emphasis, though it maybe isn't obvious on the surface, in verse 12, especially when it talks there about the day of visitation by God.

[3 : 53] So what he's saying is that here is, first of all, what we are counseled to be and to do to abstain from the passions of the flesh which war against our soul.

We'll need to look at something of that in detail and what that means. And then, secondly, this attracting of the world's attention with a view to bringing them, as God will bless that witness of our abstinence, with a view to bringing them to glorify God, as it says there on the day or a day of visitation.

So let's look at this, first of all, the abstinence that he speaks of here. I urge you to abstain from the passions of the flesh. But you notice how he begins the verse with the word beloved.

He's talking about some things which are not necessarily easy to talk about, sometimes very pointed, sometimes, as in this verse, talking about things which belong to the flesh, which belongs to our sinful self, the sinful side of our human nature, which wants to express itself in practical actions that are sinful.

And so he's saying, beloved, I urge you. He's urging them from love. He's not saying these things to them because somehow or other he's just being very firm and rigid and mechanical in what he has to say.

[5 : 16] It's flowing from a heart that loves them. It's flowing from a pastoral heart. It's flowing from a heart indeed, which is patterned on the heart of Jesus himself. And this is something that you and I have to really be aware of always, that when God speaks hard things to us as his people, he's doing so out of a concern on his own part, out of a love on his own part, that we will actually have the very best things to enjoy.

When God has given us his laws, despite what the world may think and despite what we ourselves might once have thought, and despite sometimes what we ourselves might have in our mind about that, that it keeps us from doing things we would ordinarily want to do, and therefore God is being somewhat harsh, somewhat restrictive in a bad way.

No, these are all things that God has set out for us with his best intentions. He's set out for us because he would have us in keeping to these requirements of his own to experience the very best thing that he has to give us, this life in Jesus Christ, this fellowship, this friendship with himself, this hope of eternal life, and finally the entrance to it in glory.

So he's saying, beloved, and every pastor has to try and pattern himself upon the way in which these expressions arise in the Scripture as setting out a pastor's heart.

Whenever we have difficult things to say, either from the pulpit or in personal, private counsel, I hope we never say them in other than love, in a spirit of love, because that's certainly what we would always want to be as God's pastors, as God's sent ministers of the gospel.

[7 : 10] When we urge people, when we emphasize sinful lifestyles as being wrong in the presence of God, when we urge people to turn from certain things into that which God himself counsels us as appropriate lifestyles, we're not doing that because we take delight in doing it, or somehow because we're being rather controlling over people's lives.

It's simply that following the heart of Jesus in love to people, we are setting forth the truth of God for them.

Now, Peter is dealing with vital matters, things that are ultimately of huge importance, and that's why he's saying, beloved, I'm urging you. I'm urging you as people I love, and from the love that I have for you, I want to urge this upon you.

That's what we would want to do always with the gospel and his message. What is he urging? He's urging that they abstain from the passions of the flesh.

Before we look at the word urge or abstain, let's look at what he means by the passions of the flesh. Well, he's already mentioned something like that in chapter 1 and verse 14, where he's saying, as obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, is what he calls it there.

[8 : 36] But if you want to know what he means, then go to Paul's letter to the Galatians, and you'll find a very similar passage there, where Paul very specifically outlines and specifies the passions of the flesh for us.

Because in chapter 5 of Galatians, this is what Paul is saying, urging them to walk by the Spirit, and if you do so, you will not gratify the desires, the passions of the flesh.

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit. And we see that Paul is very much in line with Peter in talking about a warfare going on here, something where the passions of the flesh, as Peter puts it, wars against the soul.

Paul is saying, Paul is saying, the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit. They war against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh. And these are opposed, the one to the other.

And then he goes on to speak about being led by the Spirit, but he says, now, the works of the flesh, in other words, the passions of the flesh, as we'll see in the definition of the flesh, those things, the sinful desires that arise from within our souls, they are spiritual things.

[9 : 47] They are spiritual in the sense in which they belong to our soul, to our minds, to that which is of our soul within us. And he's saying, they are sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.

He's given us a detailed list, but he's really saying, this is by no means the whole list. Things like these. The desires of the flesh, or the lusts of the flesh, as the old translation had it probably, maybe preferable using that.

It's a stronger word, because it's a strong word that Peter is using, just as Paul was. In his letters as well. And these passions of the flesh, are things he says you need to abstain from.

Now we've said that, by the flesh, it doesn't mean the body primarily. Sometimes we make that mistake, that the passions, that these sinful desires, are actually bodily things.

Well, they're not. They might well have the body, as a means of expressing them, as a means of putting them into action, in an obvious way. But the sinful desires themselves, are actually from the soul.

[11 : 22] They are desires of the flesh within you, that spiritual side of you and I, that is sinful, that wants to sin against God. In other words, the flesh is really that inward mind and conscience, and will and emotions, as you find them within you, as you find them tainted by sin, corrupted by sin, they become lusts.

They are, in fact, sin-biased. And what Peter is saying is, they are there within you, and you have to abstain from them.

Abstain means, literally, put a distance between yourself and them. Keep away from them. In fact, you'll find something very similar, again, in Paul's letter to the, first letter to the Thessalonians.

And again, what he's saying there, very much fits in, with what Peter is saying here, 1 Thessalonians 4, verses 3 to 5, where he's saying here, you know, he says, what instructions we gave you through our Lord Jesus.

In other words, he's saying, this is not my idea, Paul is saying, this is not what we apostles have come up with ourselves, this is the instructions that we're giving you through the Lord Jesus. It's from him, he's the originator of them.

[12 : 44] For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from sexual immorality, that each of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles, who do not know God.

You know, like that is to Peter, where Paul is saying, this is the will of God. What is it? It's your sanctification. It's your being made holy. It's being made like God.

It's being, you're made like Christ himself. And in order to do that, and to achieve that, and to reach towards that, he's saying, you have a responsibility as Christians, he's saying, to abstain, to abstain from everything, which is counter to that, which actually wants to, to go in the opposite direction of that.

Abstain, says Peter, from the passions of the flesh. So this was stressed, you see, by the apostles. And because it was stressed by the apostles, and appears now in our Bibles as God's word, God's written word to us, it's for us as well.

This is not something that was just currently appropriate in the time when the apostles lived, where they were conscious of Roman culture, and previous to that, Greek culture, as that was still very much part in the practice of the people around them, and of these great cities that they went into with the gospel, like Thessalonica, and Corinth, and Rome itself.

[14 : 14] No, he's saying, this is something that is applicable really in every age, because it's apostolic teaching, it's teaching for the church in every age.

And so you and I tonight must face that teaching. Difficult though it is, we have to abstain from the fleshly lusts that we find within ourselves.

Now that, of course, as you can very easily see and very well know, is very different to the advice you get in the world. It's very different to the advice you get from government pamphlets.

It's very different from the advice that many of our schools and children are actually given in school. When you talk about moral issues or immoral issues, whichever way you want to look at it, when you talk about relationships, when you talk about things like sex, whether it's to be confined to marriage, that's not the kind of advice that's popular.

That's not the kind of advice that's given from government authorities or any other authorities that really have displaced the Bible and put it aside. And it's no surprise that you don't get the word abstain coming up very often, is it?

[15 : 27] Because abstain means, no, I can't do that. Just as Joseph was tempted to sexual immorality at the time that an opportunity was given to him, how shall I commit this great sin, this great evil and sin against God?

He said, no. He said, no, I can't do this. I have to abstain. I need to keep my life pure because that's what God requires me and that's what God himself commends and requires of me.

And Peter is saying, that's what it has to be for us as well. That's why we have to stand as Christians against the philosophy of the world that says, no, if you've got these urges as a human being, whatever your age is, you have to let them flow.

You have to follow through with your urges. Even if Christians say they're sinful, even if the church teaching says it's sinful, and sadly some parts of the church don't say that anyway. But God is saying it.

And it's from the teaching of Christ and from the apostles. Brother, beloved, I urge you to abstain from the passions, to put a distance between you and them, to put them behind you, to not go back to them.

[16 : 53] They belong to the sinful lifestyle that you've left behind, that God rescued you from. Yes, that will make you so unlike the world around you.

It will make you at times very unpopular to the world around you if you keep emphasizing as a Christian these things that you and I must wherever we're placed. The world, you see, does not see that any of these things are wrong.

Because when you take the Bible, when you take God's law, when you take God's requirements, and you put that aside, and you put human philosophy in its place, then you're doing away with an absolute rule.

You're doing away with something which is designed for all human beings to measure their lives by and apply to their lives. That law of God, that requirement of God, that gospel of God, that Christian ethic.

And when you put something else in its place, you don't have an absolute. Because human beings can't create absolutes. They're relative. And being relative means it changes.

[18 : 01] And it changes from one generation to the next as human beings see fit to change it. So the more you displace the absolute, the more you do away with the Bible's teaching, the more you get rid of the law of God and the gospel of God and the Christian ethic, then you have really not much left but just to follow the urge of your own sinful desires.

And if they're right for you, then they're right. And there's no word wrong to be applied to them. Peter is saying, that's the way of the world. That's what you've left. That's not for Christians.

Because you abstain instead from the passions of the flesh. And notice next what he's saying. I urge you to abstain from them because they wage war against your soul.

You see, that's not what you find in the advice that's given to us commonly in the world in which we live. That's not what the world itself would say to us.

But what Peter is saying is, these passions that are in each of us naturally and these in our inmost being, they're not neutral.

[19 : 18] They are actually engaged in warfare. They are enemy soldiers. And they're waging war against your soul, against your mind, against your conscience, against your will, against your emotions.

You're involved in a battle, as Paul said, as we read in Galatians 5. These things are contrary to the Spirit. They're warring against the Spirit. They're in a different direction entirely to the Spirit.

Which is why Paul said, walk in the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. They may appear very harmless.

And indeed, they will often appear very attractive. And more so, as you put the Bible itself aside, and as people cease to inform their conscience by the truth of God's Word, then that kind of lifestyle appears far more attractive than it would otherwise be.

And the sense of guilt recedes. And the urge to just commit these things because they're right in your own eyes, well, that's just what you follow through. But he says, they are actually enemies of your soul.

[20 : 35] You know, we're carrying about in our souls a bunch of assassins. desires which are designed in their own selves, in the way they work, in the way that they seek control of your life, they're designed to kill you.

They war against your soul, and they are out to actually gain the ascendancy, and to keep everything that's like Christ actually under their feet.

I know that's personalizing these lusts as if they were in fact people almost themselves, but the Bible does personalize sin in order that we can actually see that it's very real and very active and very much committed to our destruction.

Now he says, abstain. Put a distance between you and these assassins. Don't let them kill your soul. Don't let them gain ascendancy.

Just say no when the tempter comes and when these passions arise in your own heart. You see, the terrible thing about this is that because this is in every one of us naturally, we don't actually need to bring Satan into the picture, to bring the devil into the picture and his temptations in order for these to be activated.

[22 : 02] They're active already. They're activists who come into the world and they remain active even in a Christian life. Although they are now under the mastery of Christ and under the power of God's spirit, they've not been killed off and they'll not be killed off until the day you die and until you and I die, you have to fight them.

You have to abstain from them. You need to wage war against them. I'm not suggesting that anybody here is committing these gross sins.

I have to say to my own heart, you have these assassins in yourself and you make very sure as somebody who preaches to others that you're not letting them get in the ascendancy in your own life because if you do, your ministry is finished.

And it's the same for you and for me as well. However attractive it might be, however much we can think at times we can control these things or that we can keep them hidden.

Abstain, he says, because they war against your soul. And then there's one other thing. He says, Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles, to abstain from these passions.

[23 : 32] We've seen something of what the passions of the flesh are. We've seen that he's speaking in love to them, in a loving pastoral concern. We've seen something of the meaning of the abstaining itself.

We've seen that these passions war against our soul, but why is he saying, I urge you as sojourners and exiles? We came across that at the beginning of the study in 1 Peter here at the very start of it.

He's talking to them, he's writing to them rather as exiles and scattered in this dispersion, elect exiles of the dispersion. We saw there that that really entails the whole idea spiritually that they don't belong to this world.

This world is not their home. They're on the way home. They're on a journey home. Their home is in heaven. And Peter is reminding them here that because heaven is their home, they have to seek to live while they're in this world as people who belong to heaven.

Indeed, you could go as far as to say, challenging though it is, indeed, to go as far as to say, as Christians, because we belong to heaven and are traveling to heaven and are expecting, by God's grace, to be in heaven.

[24 : 54] We have to live as if we're already there. We have to live as if we're already there. Abstain, he says, from passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul and do so as strangers, as pilgrims, as sojourners and exiles who are traveling homewards.

See, you don't find people who come just to live in a place for a short time on holiday. You don't find them taking up the practices or the culture at that place that they're in, even if they're respected when they're on holiday.

It doesn't become part of their own lifestyle. But their lifestyle is very much the lifestyle of home when they go back home where they belong to. And Peter is saying that's how it is spiritually for us as well.

We're not at home yet. So because we're not at home and we're traveling through this world and we're there temporarily, we don't take up the culture of the world. We don't take up that as our lifestyle.

We pattern that on heaven where our home is. Beloved, I urge you, as sojourners and exiles, to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul.

[26 : 12] And then secondly, he moves to attracting the world's attention. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable. You see, he's talking first of all about the context in which they're set.

They're set in a world that's opposed to what they're doing in the Christian life and what they believe in. When he's using Gentiles here, it means of course that these people he's writing to included Gentiles as well as Jews, Gentiles all the way through the Old Testament meant those pagan nations, the pagan nations who didn't know and didn't live by the terms of God.

But now in the New Testament, really the word means the world around you that's outside the church, outside the Christian world in which you live. And he's saying, keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable.

Because he's saying, so that when they speak against you as evil doers, now that's significant, isn't it? Because when they're set in that context of being surrounded by Gentiles, they're not surrounded by people who just say about these Christians, well just let them go their way, they're harmless, we don't want to bother them, we'll just let them do what they're doing.

No, he's saying they're speaking against you as evil doers, they see you as troublemakers, they see you as people who are engaged in sedition against the state, that's one of the things that Christians in those days were actually accused of, because they were following a king that they insisted on was above Caesar, the Roman emperor.

[27 : 48] So many of the Christians of those days in the apostles, when they were brought into custody, when they were tried, when they were tortured, they were accused of sedition, of fighting against the state, of being really a threat, so that the authority of the state might be overthrown.

they're not in a very easy situation. And that's so relevant, isn't it, in the day in which you and I live. It's a fallacy, of course, to think that as Christians or as a church, we control people's lives.

If only it were that easy. And you wouldn't want to control people's lives anyway. But don't for a moment imagine that some of the stuff you read about the church, and you know this yourselves very well, I don't need to really say it to you, but those things that appear in certain newspaper columns or in secular blogs or wherever you see it, that we, the church on this island, are such a control of people's lives, they're terrified of stepping out of line.

That's not reality. Very, very much the case, though, that as Christians, as people who serve the Lord Jesus Christ, you are going to be a target.

To some extent or other, you're going to be spoken of as being something of a nuisance, because people who want to have it their own way and live a sinful lifestyle and attract others into various things which the Lord's word tells us is wrong, when we stand as Christians for the Lord and say, no, this is what we would insist on as right for a proper society of human beings.

[29 : 41] These are the kind of principles and precepts and behavior that we want to actually commend and insist upon. We can't make people fall into line with that.

But when you stand up and say, this is really how it should be, well, you're going to be seen as a nuisance. you're getting in the way of progress.

You're a disturber of people's peace, when by peace they mean being left free just to their own devices and do what they want. They speak against you as evildoers.

And what then? Well, he says, in that context, amongst that provocation, in the middle of those opponents that face you daily and speak against you in a way that misrepresents who you are and what you stand for and blaspheme your Lord.

Well, the temptation, of course, isn't it, to retaliate and to retaliate in kind. And you just do the same back or speak the same back as they speak to you. No, he says, Peter, you keep your conduct among them honorable.

[30 : 55] You live consistently as far as you are able in likeness to Jesus. You don't have to go far down this chapter to actually see how he actually committed himself to God when he was accused of things wrongly.

He suffered it. He endured it. He left you an example. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

That doesn't mean you don't speak out against what you see to be evil and wrong and sinful. But it does mean you don't retaliate in the way that the world will sometimes attack you.

You keep your conduct honorable. And that word honorable is interesting. It has the idea in it of good, but also of beautiful. beautiful. And let's never lose sight of the fact that the lifestyle that God commends as a life of abstinence from sinful practices is a beautiful life.

That's where beauty in human conduct is. Not in the freedom to do what you like, but in the freedom with which Christ has set you free to live a holy life.

[32 : 16] It's beautiful conduct. Keep your conduct beautiful. Keep it honorable. So that when they do speak against you as evildoers, and this is the really interesting thing now, we're coming to the end of our study with this, but this is a very important point.

He's saying, where they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. In other words, this is really the purpose or one of the main aspects of the purpose for which we are to keep our conduct amongst the opposition around us honorable and pure and beautiful.

Because you have to seek their conversion. You have to seek that they will come to know the Jesus you know. That they will start coming to the gospel, to attend gospel teaching, gospel services, gospel fellowship, gospel worship.

But above all, that they will come to know Christ himself. Why am I saying that? Why is it that interpretation we're giving to that final verse? Well, if you look at these words, the day of visitation, actually, it would be strictly more accurate not to have the definite article there as the day of visitation, because it's actually a day of visitation.

That they may glorify God on a day of visitation. salvation. And I think we can justly say that that can be taken as God's visitation in salvation.

[33 : 50] Very often in the Bible, you find God's visitation spoken about. Sometimes they are visitations in judgment. But this is not talking about the day of judgment, because it's more the other types of visitation in the Bible, where you find God's visitation in grace.

God's visitation coming to a people with his saving power in order to bring them to himself. You remember one example of that is back in Luke, where Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, once his speech had come back to him.

Chapter 1, verse 68, his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.

He has raised up a horn of salvation for us. In other words, he is saying, this is actually what was prophesied of, this is God's visitation in grace and salvation and redemption in Christ.

And what Peter is saying is, keep your conduct beautiful, so that when they, or despite the fact they speak against you as evildoers, they may behold, they may see your good deeds, they may take, is that again the idea of take close notice of your good deeds.

[35 : 17] That's really encouraging for us tonight, isn't it, as a congregation, for you as a Christian individually. As you live your life as consistently as you can before God and before others around you, that makes itself an impact in people's lives.

Even if it doesn't appear to be so, at least to begin with, Peter is saying, that they may see your good deeds and so come to glorify God. Not in glorifying God in a forced acknowledgement that's forced out of them on the day of judgment, but rather in a day of visitation, that they may come to glorify God in coming themselves to know Christ.

Now, there's a challenge for all of us tonight. The challenge, of course, first and foremost, is whether we are, indeed, in a position to abstain against the lusts of the flesh, whether we have Christ as our Lord and as our Master, whether he's in charge of our souls and our lives or not.

But if we are, then the challenge is that we actually live in such a way that keeps our conduct pure against provocation, against opposition, against the difficulties we face.

Because, Peter has one thing in mind here. These people need Christ. These people need to be saved. These people need to come to know the truth that they're so forthrightly rejecting.

[36 : 55] These people need to know the beauty of God's salvation, the fittingness and the beauty of Jesus as a Savior. So, he says, keep your conduct honorable amongst them.

And, in fact, there's an individual example of that in the following chapter. Likewise, he says, wives, be subject to your own husbands so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives when they see your respectful and pure conduct.

Same thing in principle that he's saying here in verses 11 and 12, the world has to see as they see your consistent Christian lifetime. And there's our challenge.

As a congregation, there's a challenge as individual people as well. And, again, we finish with words very similar to that in the way the Apostle Paul addressed matters in Romans chapter 12.

Let me just read this passage in conclusion this evening. Romans chapter 12, which concludes from verse 14 as follows. verse 14.

[38 : 11] Verse 14. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another.

Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

If possible, how far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For in so doing, you will heap burning coals on his head.

In other words, you will affect his conscience. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

[39 : 14] Abstinence and attraction are the essence of the Christian life. May God bless his word to us.

Let's conclude our worship this evening singing once again. This time we're singing from Psalm 119. Psalm 119, and sing Psalms, page 164, and that section beginning at 113.

Psalm 119, verse 113. The double-minded I abhor, but your commands I love, O Lord. You are my refuge and my shield. I have set my hope upon your word.

So that section, these four verses, in conclusion to God's praise. Amen. The double-minded I abhor, but your commands I love, O Lord.

You are my refuge and my shield. I set my hope upon your word.

[40 : 30] You evil do earthly meaner, that God's commands I may obey.

By your word, keep me, I shall live. Let not my hope be swept away.

Let not my hope be swept away. Uphold me and I shall be saved.

For your decrees I have respect. All those who stray from your commands and practice falsehood, you reject.

The wicked you did scar-like cross. Therefore I love you, holy love.

[41 : 40] my body quakes what fear of you. Of your commands I stand in awe.

Of your commands I stand in awe. If you let me get to the main door, please, after the benediction.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore. Amen.