

Gospel Love

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[0 : 00] It's good to see you all this morning. Our sermon text is 1 Peter 1, verse 22, through chapter 2, verse 3. That's page 953 in the Pew Bible.

Sometimes the way in which the New Testament breaks up chapters and verses doesn't always fit with the flow of thought. So today our sermon text kind of spans the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2.

So 1 Peter 1, verse 22, through chapter 2, verse 3. Let me pray for us, and then I'll read. Lord, as we have just sung, we pray that you would speak to us through your written word so that we might see afresh your incarnate word, the Lord Jesus, and so that we might live the lives of love and holiness and joy that you have called us to and created us for in communion with you.

We pray this in Jesus' name, Father. Amen. All right, 1 Peter, chapter 1, verse 22. Peter writes this, It says, All right.

So, you probably noticed that the Olympics started this week, right? Did you catch the opening ceremony on Friday? It's always fun to watch the different national teams kind of march in to the opening ceremony, and you get to see the diversity of the country's flags and who gets to be the flag bearers at this particular Olympics.

[2 : 15] And, of course, you get to see, most importantly, maybe, the outfits that they've chosen to wear, right? You know, the U.S. decided to wear these mid-90 throwback parkas.

That was fun the first time around. Other countries wore something more stylish, you know? Others were more unique or wore something more particular to their own national culture.

But, you know, each country kind of in their own way saying in that moment on the national stage or on the international stage, This is us. This is who we are. This is how you'll know us. This is what you'll know us by.

Now, imagine. Imagine if the church, if our church even, were to march out into the opening ceremony.

What would we be known by? What would be our distinguishing mark? What would be our close of choice? You know, throughout the New Testament, there are a number of things that ought to mark the church.

[3 : 17] There are a number of things that ought to be our defining features. Of course, there's an allegiance to the truth of the gospel, of God's word, holding Jesus in the highest possible place of honor and worship.

But, you know, along with that and flowing from that, the distinguishing mark again and again of the church is more than just holding to the truth. Along with that, the defining feature that we see is love.

The church is the people as we march out into the arena of the nations around us. The church is meant to be the people that genuinely loves one another.

That's the clothing that we wear. And in our passage, Peter is reminding us, and he's calling us again to this central, essential reality of what it means to be the church.

You see the command right there in the beginning in verse 22. And this whole paragraph is telling us to love one another. That's the big idea of this part of 1 Peter.

[4 : 20] Love one another. But sadly, the church isn't always known by that set of clothes, is it? Some of you maybe have experienced churches where there isn't love, but hypocrisy and envy and slander and other things like Peter lists in chapter 2, verse 1.

And if that's been your experience, let me say that I'm deeply sorry. But this isn't how it should be. And Peter's going to show us here a different way.

He commands us to love one another, but he doesn't leave it there. He goes on to kind of drill down a little deeper. And in this text, he's going to show us three things about this love that we should have for one another, this Christian love.

And first, he's going to show us the nature of this love. What must our love be like? That's the first thing he's going to say. And then second, he's going to show us the ground of this love. Why should we love like this?

And then third, he's going to show us the growth of this love. How can we grow and become more and more people who actually do love? So that's where we're going to head in our sermon this morning. So let's take a look.

[5 : 31] First, Peter shows us the nature of Christian love. Your love, he says, must look like this. Listen again to verse 22. Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart.

So what should our love look like? You must love one another earnestly, Peter says. Now notice, Peter's particularly talking here about brotherly love.

That is, the love of Christian brothers and sisters in the church, in the family of God for one another. Remember last week in verses 13 through 21, Peter talked primarily about Christians' posture towards the world and toward our old life before we became Christians.

And he said, in that regard, we're meant to be distinct. So the key word there was holy. You know, we're pilgrims, we're exiles, we're strangers. And God wants us to be beautifully distinct in all that we do.

But here, in our text this morning, Peter's talking about our posture not towards the world, not towards our former lives, but toward fellow believers, toward one another. And the key word here is love.

[6 : 35] And that love, he says, must be earnest. And that word earnestly here is a great word. You know, it means more than just doing something with deep feeling.

It means doing something with deep constancy. The word earnest here carries the idea of something being stretched out, like a piece of cloth.

Our love should be a strenuous love, Peter says. A constant, an intentional love. A love that stretches us. You know, this is the kind of love that a husband or a wife shows when after a long day of work, you listen.

You really listen to how your spouse's day was. And that's a love that stretches you when all you want to do is get home and relax and retreat and veg out. But instead, you turn toward each other and you give each other your best.

That's the kind of stretching love that Peter's talking about. You know, this is the kind of love that decides to send a text to a struggling Christian friend in your small group.

[7 : 43] It's the kind of stretching love that invites them to coffee, even though you're not really sure what you can do to help, but still you stretch yourself and you spend some time with them. And maybe you offer to pray or offer to listen, and offer just to be present with them as they walk through trials.

You know, this is the kind of stretching love that leads you to do something bold and fearless and courageous, like assisting with a children's class on Sundays. Even though you're not sure kids are your thing, and even though it means you might have to stick around for the second service.

It stretches you a little bit. Or it leads you to help with youth group, even though teenagers sort of intimidate you. Or it leads you to help with a mentoring program through Bridges of Hope, even though you're not sure what it might look like to come alongside a kid who has a different background than you.

This is the stretching love that leads you maybe to host a small group, even though it means giving up one whole night a week to open up your home. Even though your home might be a little messier than you'd like in the middle of the work week.

This is the stretching love that leads you to introduce yourself to a newcomer on Sundays and welcome them, even if you're an introvert.

[8 : 56] This is the stretching love that leads you to forgive when a brother or sister in the church has offended or wronged you, and they ask for your forgiveness. This is the stretching kind of love that leads you to open up about your weaknesses, to a trusted Christian friend or two, asking for prayer and help.

This earnest, stretching love, this is the kind of love that shows up, even when it's costly, even when it's inconvenient, even when it's a bit outside your comfort zone. Peter says, love one another earnestly, brothers and sisters.

And notice, notice that this earnest love, it isn't optional. It's not just kind of for advanced Christians or really serious Christians.

This is the kind of love for all Christians that we should all show. Now, how do we know that? How do we know that this isn't optional love, but love for all Christians? Because in the first part of this verse, verse 22, Peter is describing our conversion.

He's talking there about what's true of every Christian. After all, he says, you've obeyed the truth. And for Peter, the truth here is the truth of the gospel.

[10 : 11] And to obey the truth of the gospel is to believe it, to receive it, to center your life around Jesus as Lord. And he says, by obeying the truth, by submitting to the claims of the gospel, your soul's been purified.

You've been cleansed. You've been made new. That's what's true of every Christian. But then he says, what's all of that for? What's the point of our conversion? Well, it's for, Peter says, sincere brotherly love.

So this sincere, earnest, stretching love, it isn't optional for Christians. It's the whole point. You know, after all, the reason you kind of pump up your bike tires after it's been sitting in the garage all winter isn't so that you can put the bike back in the garage to just gather dust, right?

No. You pump the air back into the tire so you can go out and so you can experience the joy of riding again, right? And our conversion is like that. God's aim in saving us is to create a community that loves one another and in loving one another to display his love to the world so that when we march out among the nations, they see a little picture of the love of God and how we love one another.

So this is the nature of what our love must look like. We must love one another earnestly with a love that stretches us. But as we turn to the second point of our passage then, we have to admit that this kind of love is a real challenge, isn't it?

[11 : 43] By definition, a love that stretches us doesn't come easily. And part of the reason it doesn't come easily is because, well, think about it.

It takes time and it takes energy and it takes resources. And, well, I'm just not sure I have enough time or energy or resources to do something like that.

After all, I have a lot of things to do. I have good things. I have important things and not a lot of time to do it. So I can't really stretch like this. I think we all feel like that, don't we?

So does Peter have anything to say to us about that? Well, he does actually. In verses 23 through 25, he moves from telling us about the nature of love to a second point where he tells us about the ground of this love.

Where does this love come from? Why are we able to love like this? Look again in our text, picking up at the end of verse 22. Love one another earnestly from a pure heart since, because you've been born again.

[12 : 53] Not of perishable seed, but of imperishable through the living and abiding word of God. For all flesh is like grass and its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers. The flower falls.

But the word of the Lord remains forever. And this word is the good news that was preached to you. So what is the ground of our love for one another? Where does this earnest, stretching love come from?

It comes from the fact, Peter says, that we've been born again by God's imperishable word. Notice how Peter emphasizes again and again the constancy, the permanence of God's word here.

God's word, he says, is imperishable. It remains forever. In a world where nothing lasts and everything fades, God's word is living and abiding. It goes on.

It gives life and it never goes away. And then Peter quotes Isaiah 40. And we read Isaiah 40 earlier in the service. And in the context, what's Isaiah talking about?

[13 : 48] Isaiah is talking about the Old Testament return from exile. God's people had been trampled by nations, seemingly more powerful, seemingly more permanent than they were.

But Isaiah says, don't you see? Don't you see that all flesh is like grass and all its glory like a flower of grass?

Consider these great nations, he says. All their armies, all their monuments, all their rulers. Consider their glory, the wealth that they amass, the power that they wield.

Do you see it? It's ultimately like the grass of the field. The sun rises, a season passes, and it withers and fades.

All that glory. It's like a meadow flower. Beautiful for a day. But gone the next. And Isaiah was right.

[14 : 47] Babylon withered and fell. Persia withered and fell. Alexander's Greece withered and fell. Rome withered and fell. Everything moves from life to death.

From order to decay. Everything is perishable and destined for dust. Except one. God is the one true living and abiding one.

Who never changes and never fades. And therefore the word of this God must also be living and abiding, remaining forever.

To the Old Testament exiles, this meant that God's promise of return and restoration would stand. His promise to bring them home would remain. Even if the mightiest nations seemed at present to rule the day.

The word of God would stand and it would all fade. But you know, as New Testament believers, we see the even greater promise.

[15 : 53] Because Peter says, this word, this is the good news that's been preached to you, Christians. The message of the apostles that they had heard and received.

The good news about Jesus. This is the fullness of God's living and abiding word. What the prophets foresaw was not just a word that brought a mere return from political or geographical exile.

The word of the gospel has brought life from death. This word, Peter says, it's the thing that's made you born anew.

You've come alive. And what is this gospel? What is this message that the apostles proclaim that the prophets foresaw?

What is this message that the church continues to proclaim? On the authority of the apostles' words preserved for us in Scripture? What is this good news? That can make us born again.

[16 : 58] Come alive. Well, friends, this is the good news. And you see it throughout all the pages of Scripture and all the pages of the New Testament.

The good news that there's one God who made us all. One God who's holy and just and good. And this God made us humans in his image to love and obey him.

But instead of loving God and obeying him and loving one another, instead we rebelled. And we decided to make ourselves kings. And to pretend that we could save ourselves.

And in rebelling against the living God, we of course fell under the sentence of death. But God in his love saw us, his sinful image bearers, languishing under the sentence of death.

And rather than destroying us in his justice, he became one of us in the incarnation. In Jesus, God took on a fully human nature.

[18 : 05] And after living a perfect life in our place, the life that we should have lived, he loved us in the most sincere and earnest way imaginable. In love, Jesus was literally stretched on a cross.

And he died the death that we deserve to die. And then three days later, God the Father raised Jesus from the dead, declaring his conquest of sin and death, so that all who turn to the Lord Jesus and who are united to him, not through good works, not through trying hard, but united to him simply through faith, will be forgiven of their sins through his sin-bearing death and given a new spiritual life through his resurrection.

This is the good news. This is the gospel. And Peter's telling us here that this gospel, this truth about Jesus Christ is the imperishable, living, and abiding word of God that causes us to be born again.

You know, when you hear the truth about Jesus, you aren't just hearing a sort of retelling of historical events. You're hearing the very word of the living God. And it's like a seed, Peter says, full of power to wake you up from your sleep, to bring you from death to life.

And Peter's point here is that if God's word is imperishable and abiding, then your rebirth by this word is likewise imperishable and abiding.

[19 : 41] This new place of life where God has brought you, you won't fall out of it and you won't lose it and it will never end. We're no longer moving from life to death like the grass of the field, but through the gospel, we're moving from death to increasing life.

The spiritual principle or power inside of us isn't a principle or power that runs out or diminishes. It's always and ever living. And this is where it all connects to our call to love one another.

You know, we won't love one another earnestly. We won't love one another in a way that really stretches us if we think that our lives are simply like a clock winding down eventually to run out.

If my days are finite, I might love those who benefit me. I might love those who love me, but I won't love those who stretch me because life's too short.

But what if God, through the gospel of his stretching love, has stamped eternity onto my heart? What if I'm a part of his forever kingdom that never fades?

[21 : 02] What if I've been born again with an imperishable seed? If that's true, then why not stretch like he stretched for me?

Why not love earnestly? What do I have to fear? But then you look, not just at yourself and your own future as it stretches out into the eternity of God's goodness and love.

Look now at your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Don't you see? They too have been born again by God's imperishable word. They are going to be your family forever.

So the love that you show them isn't some passing act of kindness or pity or charity. The love that you show to one another is another brick permanently laid into the kingdom of God that will never fade.

Look at your fellow church members. Don't you see how Christ stretched out his love over them on the cross? Don't you see how treasured they are in his eyes? Don't you see how they will be his prize for all eternity?

[22 : 16] You know, we'll stretch out for our jobs, we'll stretch out for our reputations, we'll stretch out for material comforts and security, but how could we not stretch out for the brothers and sisters that Jesus purchased with his own blood?

So this is the ground of Christian love, friends. This is where earnest, strenuous love comes from. It comes from the deep freedom and security of knowing that you've been born again to eternal life by God's eternal word and knowing that your brothers and sisters in Christ share that same eternal life with you.

So love earnestly, Peter says. Okay. So Peter's shown us the nature of this love and he's shown us the ground of this love, but how do we grow in it?

How do we expand it more and more in our hearts? Well, that's where Peter takes us in chapter 2, verses 1 through 3. He says, so, okay, given everything I've just told you, so, put away all your malice and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.

Instead, like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk that by it you may grow up into salvation if indeed you've tasted that the Lord is good.

[23 : 39] So how do we grow in this love for one another? First, Peter says, there are some things you need to put away. Okay, now that word put away is used a lot in the New Testament and it's used a lot to describe what we should do with ungodly or unloving attitudes or behaviors.

And the sense of that word is that you're kind of taking off an old set of clothes. You're taking off an old set of clothes that doesn't fit you anymore, an old set of clothes that you don't need.

You take it off and you put it away. Now there's something deep being talked about here if we pause to see it.

Peter isn't saying, look, just stop doing all these things. You're lying, stop lying. You're being hypocritical, stop it. That's not exactly what he's saying.

He's saying, you used to wear those things. You used to put them on because you thought you needed to clothe yourself that way. But you don't need to wear those clothes anymore.

[24 : 44] You can take them off and put them away. Because think about it. Think about something like envy. Envy, right, is wanting what someone else has and not liking them for it.

But why do you need to wear those clothes of envy? What was it you wanted that that person had? And why did you want their beauty or their prestige or their home life that they displayed on social media?

Can you answer that question? I envy their physical appearance because I see how other people look at them. And I want other people to look at me that way.

I want someone to look at me the way people look at them. I want to be seen. I want to be noticed. But Peter's saying, you know, friend, you can take that garment of envy off.

Put it away. Because there is one who sees you. And there is one who notices you. There is one who says, you're the apple of my eye and I'm ravished by the beauty that I see in you.

[25 : 54] And he's not just anyone. He's the king of the universe. The Lord Jesus sees you as his bride and as his beloved. He moved heaven and earth to get you and woo you and win you.

And you're jealous of her because of him? Why do you need it anymore? You don't need envy anymore, so put it away. Those clothes don't fit you anymore.

It's the same for malice and deceit and hypocrisy and slander. The reason why we put on some of those clothes might be different, but in the end, because of who God is now for you in the gospel, you don't need those anymore.

Those clothes don't fit. You used to be a deceitful person bending the truth, telling white lies because that's how you used to keep control of things. And after all, if you're not in control, who is and who's going to take care of you?

But look, there is one who has ordained all things according to the counsel of his will and in that eternal plan, he loved you and chose you before the creation of the world and died for you.

[27 : 03] And now this great God is working all things for your good to make you more like his son so you don't need to wear those clothes of deceit anymore because God's in control and he loves you.

So this is the first way we grow, Peter says. We put off and we put away those practices that we used to wear that simply run counter to love. But there's a second thing Peter mentions in verse 2 and this is kind of the main point of these first three verses of chapter 2.

How do we grow up into this salvation? How do we grow in love? Like newborn babies, Peter says, long for pure spiritual milk. Notice that Peter's talking about our desire here.

He's telling us to long for something with a strong desire He's saying the key to loving is more than merely exercising your will and it's more than merely convincing your mind.

It's about stoking your desire. Now growing in love, yes, yes, growing in love involves your intellect and involves your will but it's not merely an intellectual exercise.

[28 : 17] You can't simply think yourself into becoming a more loving person and it's not merely a volitional exercise. You can't simply just decide one day to become a more loving person. You've tried that.

It doesn't work. It has to happen from the inside out. We have to long for something. Peter says, we have to long for something the way newborns long for milk.

But what is this milk that Peter's talking about? This milk that's pure and spiritual? Well, what's Peter just been talking about? He's talking about God's word, the good news that's proclaimed to you.

So you see what Peter's saying here. He's saying, he's saying, Christians, the gospel doesn't just give us birth spiritually. The gospel's what grows us spiritually too. It's the deep nourishment that our hearts need to change and grow.

as we drink deeply from the fountain of God's grace and his word. It's not just our minds getting more information. It's not just our wills getting more instruction. It's our hearts feasting on what can truly satisfy.

[29 : 28] After all, Peter says, haven't you tasted that the Lord is good? The Lord who stretched himself out for you. Haven't you experienced his goodness?

And if so, why are you trying to find something else that will make you a more loving person? Remember what the Apostle John says in his first letter, we love because he first loved us.

The only thing that will loosen the grip of fear or pride or insecurity or vanity, all the things that keep us from genuinely loving one another, the only thing that's going to break those chains is the love of the Lord Jesus Christ in the biblical gospel.

And we have to keep going back to it like a newborn to milk, hungry to drink our fill. But Peter isn't saying here that the gospel is some sort of simplistic thing.

He's not sort of saying the gospel is milk and then one day you move on to meat. No, do you remember what he said back in chapter 1, verse 12? The gospel's the thing that angels long to look into.

[30 : 36] It's the very wonder of heaven. It's the diamond that will be turned and turned and turned and fresh flashes of beauty and light will continue to stream forth and the wonder will last for all eternity.

And that's why Peter says, long for it now. Go after it like a newborn goes after their bottle. Because every ray that flashes forth from this diamond has the power to grow you into this great salvation.

It's the biblical gospel that's going to help you fill out this new set of clothes you've been given. So that's why when we sing as a church we pick songs that are rich with God's word.

And that's why when we preach we try to turn this diamond again and again and help us see how the gospel speaks fresh to our hearts. And that's why we do the Lord's Supper because Jesus commanded this in his word as a means to experience the gospel of his body broken and bloodshed for us.

Now how about during the week for you? Are you finding ways to long for this pure spiritual milk? Are you finding ways to listen to read to meditate to memorize God's word so that the grace of the gospel gets down deep?

[32 : 01] Now you might not feel like you're gazing in wonder at a diamond every time you sit down to read your Bible, right? My Bible reading plan right now has me in the book of Job. Sometimes that's pretty long it's a long slog through the book of Job, okay?

Like we can all admit some of those places. But be encouraged. You're still taking in the nourishing milk of the word. It's growing you even at times when you don't feel it.

Now if you're struggling how to figure out how to do this on your own, how to long and drink in the milk of the word on your own during the week, talk to someone. Ask for help. Talk to your small group leader or a mature Christian friend.

Ask them for help in how you might long for and drink in the pure spiritual milk of the word. We all need help along the way. Don't be afraid to ask. But don't rest until you've found a way to drink, to let your desires be filled by the one who created your desires in the first place, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Who indeed is good. And here's what we'll find. As we keep coming back to God's living and abiding word, the written word of scripture that proclaims the saving news of God's grace, as we keep coming back, we'll grow in love.

[33 : 21] Love not just for God, but for one another. And the clothes that we wear will no longer be the clothes of malice and envy and deceit, because we won't need those clothes anymore.

Instead, as we march forth among the nations, as we live as the church, the people of God, the clothes that we wear, our distinguishing mark, will more and more be genuine, earnest love for one another and will be known in the way Jesus wanted us to be known by our love.

Let's pray together. Father, we ask that by your spirit, you would continue to stoke in us a longing for your word and help our hearts to put away the unloving practices so that we might genuinely and earnestly love one another.

God, we admit that it's hard and we admit that we failed, so would you forgive us, Lord? But we also know that you've given us your spirit to make it possible, so help us to trust in that and in you and to go forth to love.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.