

The Family of True Love

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[0 : 0 0] But this evening we're going to turn to 1 Peter, and looking at the series that Willie began last week. 1 Peter chapter 1, page 1014.

And we're reading again those verses, 1, 22, to chapter 2, verse 10. So 1 Peter 1, 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, since you have been born again, 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, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.

And this word is the good news that was preached to you. So put away all malice, and all deceit, and hypocrisy, and envy, and all slander.

[1 : 2 5] Like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God, chosen and precious, you yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For it stands in Scripture, Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.

So the honour is for you who believe. But for those who do not believe, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, and a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence.

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

[2 : 4 9] Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Amen. May God bless to us his word this evening. Do turn with me, if you would, to the passage that we read there, 1 Peter, end of chapter 1, beginning of chapter 2, page 1014, I think, if you have one of the church Bibles.

And we're asking the question, what is the church? We're looking at what the apostle Peter, in this little section of his letter, teaches us about the nature of the church of Jesus Christ.

We began last Sunday evening, and discovered to our great relief, I think, at least my great relief, that talking about the church is nothing to do with architecture. It's nothing to do with talking about governance, or ceremonies, or anything like that.

Rather, the building that Peter is interested in is a living one. It's built of living stones, he says. And these living stones make up God's household, that is, the people among whom God chooses to dwell by his Spirit.

[4 : 11] And last time we looked at the privilege of what it means to belong to God's household, to his church, to the home, as we saw last time, the home of true life. It's the home forever.

Of those who, he says in chapter 1, verse 23, have been born again, that is, born into everlasting life through the planting of God's living, imperishable seed in them.

God's own life-giving seed that imparts his eternal life. What an extraordinary thing. And that happens, we saw, through the preaching of God's living and enduring Word, which is the instrument of God's own Spirit in imparting that life to his people.

But Peter doesn't stop, does he, at the point of new birth. He goes on immediately to speak not just of the privilege of this new birth, but of its purpose.

Babies are not born to remain as babies, are they, as infants? Cute as that stage might well be. Those of us who have had children can remember the days of newborn infancy very fondly.

[5 : 21] And the greater the distance becomes between now and then, the more fondly you remember it. But when you're in the midst of it, my goodness, it's a different story, isn't it? You're longing, longing for the days when nappies will be a thing of the past, when squawking constantly is a thing of the past, when food flying everywhere is not happening anymore.

You're longing for your infants to grow up. And of course, that is exactly what God wants of his household, that we should grow up.

God doesn't want his household, his temple, his dwelling place to be a creche or a nursery school forever. Forever stuck in immaturity. No, no, no.

Rather, he wants his children, those who are born of his holy seed, to grow up. Verse 2 of chapter 2 here, to grow up, he says, to salvation.

So having tasted of the privilege of this new birth, of God's imperishable seed, immediately, Peter wants us to go on to drink deeply and understand of the purpose of that new birth.

[6 : 33] That God's household might be found growing up to maturity. And he shows us that the church, as the house, the home of true life, has got to show itself growing into maturity as his family of true love.

And that is what God brings his people to new birth for. Look at chapter 1, verse 22. We're born again, he says, of imperishable seed, having purified our souls by obedience to the truth.

For what? for sincere, brotherly love. We're to love one another earnestly from a pure heart.

So I want to focus this evening on this understanding of the church as the family of true love. And it's clearly stated there in verse 22 of chapter 1, but it's described practically, practically, in a very practical way, in the first three verses of chapter 2.

It's all about growing up, and growing up is all about growing together into real spiritual maturity. So I want to think about these two aspects that Peter shows us.

[7 : 49] It's very simple, but they are entirely inseparable. That is the fruit of spiritual maturity and the feeding for that spiritual maturity.

First of all, the fruit of spiritual maturity is seen in Christians humbly loving together. Growing up into salvation, Peter says, means growing together in pure spiritual love.

Verse 22, love one another earnestly from a pure heart since you've been born again. See how the new birth and the new love are inseparable there, aren't they?

And that must be because love is the characteristic that is imparted to this whole family by virtue of its birth.

Love is intrinsic to the seeds from which we are begotten. It's fixed in the very warp and woof of this family's spiritual DNA.

[8 : 57] It's so characteristic, in fact, it's so characteristic that it is a proof of genuine paternity. That's how you prove paternity, isn't it, with a DNA test.

You have to prove that there's a match with the father's unique imprint in the offspring. Well, our family DNA is the seed of God himself. And how is it that John puts it?

God is love. God is love. John, in his gospel, isn't it, who talks similarly about the new birth, about the birth from above.

And it's John, in his letters, who tells us so clearly that this new birth is always, always characterized by new love. Love for the father, love for our brothers and sisters, always goes together.

Always. everyone, says John, everyone who loves the father, loves whoever has been born of him. Everyone who loves the father loves others who have been born of the father, our brothers and sisters.

[10 : 02] It must be so because we share the same family DNA. That's what Paul says in Romans chapter 5. God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who's been given to us.

It's God who is love who has poured his own love into our hearts to bring us to new birth. Or in Peter's language, he has planted his seed in us, his DNA of love, from which our whole new life springs forth and begins to grow, so that it will go on growing into a mature love of God.

God's love is good. And the fruit, the evidence of that growth in spiritual life is seen in the church as a family of true love, which is growing together in real spiritual love.

In brothers and sisters, verse 22, who are loving one another earnestly, earnestly, the Greek lexicons tell us that word means constantly, it means strenuously, at full stretch.

That puts it really well, I think. We're to love one another at full stretch from pure hearts. Well, what does that mean?

[11 : 24] It's easy to say, isn't it? Well, look at chapter 2, verse 1. It's only possible to love like that if there's a putting away of attitudes of impure hearts, attitudes of anti-love, the things that destroy relationships, the things that drive people apart.

You see how learning to love strenuously begins with an enormous necessary negative. put away malice. That's ill will towards other people.

Put away deceit and hypocrisy. That's false dealing with other people, including false spirituality. Put away envy and slander. That's wanting to promote yourself so you're always diminishing other people.

So often that happens through ill talk, doesn't it? Ill talk about others in order to advance our own gains. Think of the politicians. They're at it all the time, aren't they?

Leadership elections. My goodness. Fertile ground for all of that. Envy and slander. But we must put away all of those things because, Peter tells us, doesn't he, in his second letter that heaven is the home of righteousness.

[12 : 44] That is, it's the place where pure and right relationships abound perfectly. Between man and God, but between all human beings, all the children of God, with one another.

That's our permanent home, he says. The home of righteousness, the home of God's family, the home of the church, the family of love. The very antithesis of what verse 1 here of chapter 2 is speaking about.

So we have to ask ourselves, don't we, is our church here or whatever church any business might belong to? Is it a home of right relationships, of pure spiritual love?

Is the fruit of real spiritual maturity seen in evidence in that way? Are brothers and sisters growing together in pure spiritual love?

It's by their fruit you'll know them, said Jesus. In other words, whether people are full of impressive spiritual talk, but whether it's real, whether it's real, not just a sham.

[13 : 53] And Peter's saying the same thing here, it's by their fruit that you can tell the nature of the seed from which they were born in the first place, truly, really born. You see it in the fruit, don't you?

The origin. I'm now at the stage where I'm often seeing the grown-up youngsters coming here as students, and I know their parents, and every time I see their face, I see their parents' face.

I'm seeing the seed from which the fruit has come. Well, the fruit of God's true family, and his seed of everlasting love, is real brotherly love.

Because his seed is in those people. The seed of God is love that's given his family birth, that goes on giving his family life. And that fruit of maturity, that real brotherly love, is all through this letter of Peter.

If you look at it in chapter 2, verse 17, love the brotherhood, he says. Again in chapter 3, verse 8, finally, brotherly love, have brotherly love among you.

[15 : 01] Chapter 4, verse 8, above all, about everything, keep on loving one another earnestly, he says. Why? Because love covers a multitude of sins. The very last verse of the whole letter, chapter 5, verse 14, greet one another with a kiss of love.

You see, that is the mark of a people who are on the road to salvation, according to Peter. Remember, Peter tells us that our full salvation, which is a certain hope, but it's not yet our possession until Jesus returns.

He's telling us, isn't he, that that salvation, that final salvation, is being shaped by our whole life here and now, by the life of faith that we live.

Because our salvation, our final salvation, will be the consummation of what we are becoming now, what we're growing into now, as Christian people.

And as one writer puts it very trenchantly, those who live in hell can't expect to arrive in heaven. If we're living the antithesis of loving relationships, how do we expect to suddenly be those, full of those loving relationships at the end?

[16 : 16] And all through this letter, Peter's focus is on the future, and it's on living now as God's people for what will be permanent forever. Living for the grace that will be brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ, is how he puts it in verse 13 of chapter 1.

And that's why he keeps urging his readers to be now, obviously. The home of true love, which is the one thing that will last forever.

Love never ends. Isn't that what Paul says to the Corinthian church? All sorts of good things that God gives to his people now will come to an end.

Gifts will come to an end, he says. Prophecies will come to an end. Knowledge will come to an end. Even faith, even hope, will give way to sight and the presence of the Lord. But love, love never ends.

Because love is the goal. It's the love of God, shared with his people. And that's why Paul, too, when he's focusing on writing to the church, he's focused on this same thing of growing up by growing together in love.

[17 : 28] Writing to the Galatians, that very polemic letter, and he says to them, the only thing that counts, the only thing, as we await our hope of righteousness, the only thing that counts now is faith at work through love.

Very striking. You see, the whole New Testament speaks to us with one voice, and it says this, you can't grow up in the Christian life without growing together in Christian love.

I'll say it again, you can't grow up in the Christian life to maturity without growing together in Christian love in the church. The fruit of real spiritual maturity is always seen in believers humbly loving together.

Because the true church is God's family of true love. That's a real challenge, isn't it, for any church, including us. It's a challenge for every Christian.

Because a church fellowship that isn't marked out by earnest, constant, strenuous, mutual love, cannot, by definition, therefore be a church that is mature, full of Christians who are mature.

[18 : 46] According to Peter, it's a church that's immature. It doesn't matter how much knowledge its members might have about all kinds of things. In God's eyes, it's immature. It's infantile.

It's not growing up. It's failing to thrive, is how we'd put it, of a child. No matter how gifted, no matter how zealous it might be, according to God, it's as empty and useless as a gathering of pagans, as a temple of false religion.

That's exactly what Paul says when he writes very, very similarly to the church in Corinth. Do you remember? Actually, turn with me to 1 Corinthians 13, because it's such a misunderstood passage, isn't it?

Absolutely not a passage to be read at weddings, even though it speaks about love. Paul says, if I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not loved, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I'm nothing.

[19 : 56] If I give away all I have, if I deliver up my body to be burned as a martyr, but have not love, I gain nothing.

You see, zeal, knowledge, sound theology, radical commitment, even martyrdom, but no love, the true love of Christ, nothing. And love, you see, was the very antithesis of what the Corinthians were showing.

Read on in verse 4, love is patient and kind and you're anything but. Love does not envy and boast. All the way through the letter, Paul's telling them how envious and how boastful they are.

Love is not arrogant or rude. Well, that's exactly what they were towards him and others. Love does not insist on its own way. Love is not irritable or resentful.

It doesn't rejoice at wrongdoing, but it rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. What he's describing there is the opposite of what he's seeing in their church fellowship.

[21 : 05] You're not behaving like mature Christians, like grown-ups. You're like infants. He goes on to say, when I was a child, yeah, I behaved like a child too, but then I grew up, I became a man and I stopped behaving like a child, but you haven't.

You haven't grown up. You need to be growing together in love because love never ends.

And Peter's saying exactly the same here. Come back to 1 Peter chapter 2 and verse 1. It begins, doesn't it, with that huge negative. Love means putting away malice, deceit, envy, hypocrisy, slander, all of these things.

So how does that happen? Well, Peter says that for there to be the fruit of real spiritual maturity, which is seen in Christians humbly loving together, there must be the feeding of real spiritual maturity.

And that's what's seen in Christians humbly learning together. Growing up into salvation, he says, means feeding together humbly on what he calls pure spiritual milk.

[22 : 25] Chapter 2, verse 2. Like newborn infants long for, crave the pure spiritual milk, which of course is the word of gospel truth.

Well, all mothers know, don't they, how persistent, how determined the craving is of the little baby for its milk. If it wants fed, it will scream and stream until it gets fed and you've got to provide the milk.

It craves that milk. It will persist it and pursue it. And Peter says that's the only way that we as Christians are going to grow spiritually too. If we crave the pure spiritual milk, the sustenance that comes from the Lord himself.

It's his spiritual life, you see, he says that we've tasted in verse 3, tasted the Lord himself in coming to faith. And it's his life-giving seed that was planted in us right at the beginning through his living word.

And we're going to grow up into salvation to go on and become mature, says verse 2 here, simply by feeding more and more and more on that milk, that same living and abiding word.

[23 : 36] Jesus says that all the time, doesn't he? My words are spirit and life. This is your food and drink, he's saying. Not just to be tasted once, but to be craved constantly, to be drunken, to be digested, so that you'll go on growing and so that you will grow up.

James says something very similar. We saw it last time, I think, in James chapter 1, where he talks about the believers being brought forth by the word of truth. Very similar language to Peter.

And he says we're to go on receiving with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save us. Read it later in James 1, verses 19 to 21.

There's the same negative, putting away, and the same positive, receiving. Exactly like Peter here. It's always that necessary negative that makes far more powerful the positive.

The word implanted, the word first tasted, it must go on nourishing us, bringing us up to salvation. And according to Peter, that maturity is always evidenced in the fruit of a church that is growing together in love.

[24 : 52] Always those two things go together. Now see what it means for for Peter to put those two things together so inseparably, the growing together in spiritual love and the feeding together on the spiritual milk of the word, the fruit of maturity and the feeding of maturity.

It means, you see, doesn't it, that where there's a church where there's no earnest loving of the brethren, loving one another, that can't be a church where there really is a true and earnest love for the Bible.

It can't be true. No matter how much prominence might be given to the Bible in the church's formulations and doctrine, even in the church's preaching. If it's not a church that is growing in love, it can't be a church that really is truly and humbly learning together, craving that feeding of spiritual milk, actually taking it in, digesting it, making it put on real spiritual muscle, real spiritual flesh and blood.

If that fruit is not in evidence, then it means that that church and those Christians are doing what James also talks about in that first chapter of his letter.

They're being hearers only and not doers of the word. They're deceiving themselves. They're coming to church, they're opening the Bibles, they're talking about biblical truth and exposition and all that sort of thing.

[26 : 22] They're looking in the mirror in their Sunday best clothes and then they just go away and forget all about it for all the rest of the week and the rest of their life. It doesn't get through into reality.

But learning together humbly and loving together humbly cannot be separated in the Bible. If either one of those things is really happening, the other must be happening.

The evidence that a baby is feeding properly, it's not just that it spends hours and hours and hours suckling, is it? The evidence it's actually feeding properly is that the baby is growing, that it's gaining weight.

That's why the midwives and the health visitors measure the babies and weigh them. And the evidence that a baby is really growing and thriving is that it's becoming more and more recognizable as a growing human being, as a developing human being, looking more and more like a person as it grows.

You don't tell that a baby is growing because it's starting to resemble a giant bottle filled with milk that's overflowing all the time. That would be bizarre. Well, it's the same, isn't it, in the church.

[27 : 32] You see the evidence of true feeding on the pure spiritual milk of God's Word. It isn't that we just grow into some great big kind of biblical encyclopedia, regurgitating all sorts of undigested knowledge.

Bible texts and things like that. There are some Christians, aren't there, who think they're very mature because they've read lots and lots of dense theological tomes and they can recite creeds and catechisms and confessions and all the rest of it.

But don't you find that sometimes those are the very last people you actually want to be around? The very last person you actually want to have in your Bible study group? They're the people very often you want to avoid, aren't they?

Because they think they've drunk in spiritual milk by the gallon. But it's just all gone through them undigested. And I don't need to elaborate, do I, how unpleasant an aroma undigested milk leaves when it goes through a baby in that way.

Not to mention it's failure to thrive. the evidence of true Christian growth from true feeding in God's word is that we are becoming more and more truly human, more and more recognizably human beings in the image of our heavenly father who brought us to birth, more and more in the image of our true brother, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[28 : 58] And that we are loving one another as he loved. How did he love? He says, as I have loved you.

As he washed their feet and spoke to them about giving his own life on the cross for them. So Peter is clear, we've been brought to birth as Christians to grow up and to grow into salvation.

But we won't grow up into our abiding destiny as God's true family of love unless we are growing together in that love.

And we don't grow together in that love unless we are feeding together as God's people on his pure, unadulterated word of life in Christ.

Unless we are receiving with meekness the implanted word which is able to save us. love without learning, that would be just sentimentality, wouldn't it?

[30 : 08] That wouldn't be real Christian maturity. So how are we to feed properly for real spiritual maturity so that we really are humbly learning together and feeding on that pure spiritual milk in a way that we will grow up in love and not just be puffed up in knowledge, in loveless knowledge like the Corinthians?

That's a vital question, isn't it? And the answer is, as Paul says to them and as Peter says here, the answer is that it's all in our attitude to feeding.

Look again at verses 1 and 2. You see how closely connected those two verses are. Peter's telling us that to really feed for spiritual maturity, we need to seek that milk of the word.

With perseverance, we need to crave it, and with penitence, with humility, we need to crave it, we need to long for it, says verse 2, like an infant, instinctively knowing that absolutely nothing must get in the way of our feeding.

We won't be distracted, we will persevere in it, even if it's hard learning to feed, even if it takes a lot of practice, a lot of time. And it's this hard work, isn't it?

[31 : 27] Let's be honest. It's hard work for a baby to learn how to suckle properly, it's hard work for us to learn how to feed productively and properly on the word of God.

But we will make sure no obstruction gets in the way. Look at verse 1. Verse 1 there would read better this way. So, putting away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk.

The negative and the positive go together. He's saying the only way to feed so as to have the proper effect for real spiritual growth is that you put away those wrong attitudes.

In other words, you have to have an attitude of genuine penitence, putting away all those sinful attitudes and genuine faith, craving God's true life to feed you, to sustain you, to shape you, to change you.

That's the only way to feeding that bears fruit, putting away and receiving repentance and faith.

[32 : 43] you know, don't you, if you take medicines, that there are some medicines that can only be absorbed if you're not taking other medicines, or sometimes even if you're not eating other foods.

Sometimes there's herbal remedies and things like that. You're told, don't take this if you're on this medicine. Why? Well, because those other things stop that medicine that's going to help you from being absorbed from your body, from your intestine.

So you take the medicine, but if it's not absorbed, because it's blocked by something else, it does you no good at all. And PDC is saying that the medicine of God's word, for it to get inside your system, for it to do its work of healing and restoration, you have to get rid of all of these attitudes, all of these things that will stop God's word getting into you, and crave only that healing medicine that can save you.

In other words, he's saying, you see, if a church doesn't do that, if Christians don't do that, if they harbor pride and arrogance and ill will and envy and all of these things towards one another, then even the best and the purest and the most effective Bible teaching you could possibly find can't do you any good at all.

Even the Apostle Paul, the Apostle Peter, every week here, preaching to all of us. We don't put away those attitudes that stop that being absorbed into us.

[34 : 19] Even the Lord Jesus speaking to us, it won't help us. And that's why, you see, very sadly, there are churches that are very big on their sign theology, but they have only a very sad testimony, because they're not putting away sinful and prideful attitudes, so that they can really take in the nourishing milk of God's Word and receive the transforming power, which can only be received with meekness, with humility, not with malice and hypocrisy.

So they're failing to thrive, they're failing to grow, they're failing to mature. That's why there are some Christians who always talk about very sound theology, but who always leave a very sad taste.

When you encounter them. What's the good of sound theology? All it leaves is a sad testimony and a sour taste.

You sometimes wonder, don't you, with those kind of people, if, verse 3, they really have tasted that the Lord is good. That he is good. There are people who can talk an awful lot about the Bible and know an awful lot about the Bible, people.

But they seem to have spiritual malabsorption syndrome. And I don't need to tell you, do I, that churches and Christians who carry that lingering aroma, just as the hospital wards that carry that lingering aroma, the people with malabsorption syndrome, they're not places you want to hang around, they're not places you want to bring people.

[36 : 01] spiritual steateria is a very nasty thing. I won't explain it, but ask one of the medics. If our feeding is to lead to fruitfulness, we need to heed Peter's instructions for the only way, the only way to real nourishment, the only way to real growth, and it's here in these verses, 1 and 2.

Putting away all malice, all deceit, and hypocrisy, and envy, and all slander, like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation.

So important, isn't it? We rightly crave God's word, the way he wants us to, when we come to it, not proudly seem to master it, so that our learning might outgrow others.

But when we come to it humbly, seeking for it to master us, so that our love might outgrow others, that's the kind of feeding, isn't it, that will result in the fruit of spiritual maturity that Peter wants us to have.

love. That's the kind of feeding that's seen in the family of true love. Where brothers and sisters in Christ are growing up, humbly loving together, as they humbly learn together.

[37 : 41] Craving the pure spiritual milk of the gospel of salvation. salvation. So how are we feeding when we come to church, when we gather together, when we read the scriptures ourselves?

So as we master the word, so it masters us. And how are we loving as we live together and seek to learn together?

We're called to be the family of true love, love. And that begins with putting away all that is anti-love.

Well, let's pray. Growing together, love one another earnestly from a pure heart.

And growing up, putting away all malice and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander and so like newborn infants longing for the pure spiritual milk so we do grow up to salvation.

[39 : 04] Help us, Lord, we pray. Help us to be a place where people see your life love. And therefore your love in our midst, real and tangible, in our words, in our actions, the things we do say, the things we won't say of one another and to one another.

Help us, we pray, Lord, to be a place filled with the fragrance, the beautiful fragrance of our Lord Jesus Christ, not the stench of all that we once were outside of Christ, not those who turn people away, but those whose life and whose love invites people in to see what we have found and to taste what we have known that the Lord is good and not evil, loving and not hating.

So help us, Lord, help us in our feeding and help us in our loving. For Jesus sake, Amen.