

Sermon Text

1 Peter 2:1–12 (NASB 2020)

1 Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander,
2 and like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation,

3 if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

4 And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by people, but is choice and precious in the sight of God,

5 you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

6 For this is contained in Scripture: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a choice stone, a precious cornerstone, And the one who believes in Him will not be put to shame.”

7 This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for unbelievers, “A stone which the builders rejected, This became the Chief cornerstone,”

8 and, “A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense”; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this they were also appointed.

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a Holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

10 for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

11 Beloved, I urge you as foreigners and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul.

12 Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God on the day of visitation.

Opening

An embarrassed woman approached the pastor after the worship service to say, “I hope you didn’t take it personally, Pastor, when my husband walked out during your sermon.”

“I did find it rather disconcerting,” the pastor replied.

“It wasn’t out of any disrespect to you,” insisted the woman, “Fred has been walking in his sleep ever since he was a child.” We’ll do our best to keep you awake today.

Introduction

I will be preaching a series of sermons on Peter’s First Letter. I preached on the first chapter of this book two years ago, so I will begin with the second chapter, but first, I’ll provide some background about the book.

Our sermon text is from Peter’s First Epistle. The author identifies himself in the first verse as “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.” Peter is writing a general letter to Gentile Christians who are scattered throughout the provinces of Asia Minor, which is now modern-day Turkey. Among many other churches in that region, the seven churches of the Book of Revelation are located there. It is likely, as I said, that the audience is Gentile Christians because, in several places, Peter addresses the concerns of Gentile Christians.

Strong tradition places Peter in Rome at his death. Traveling by land, he needed to go through Asia Minor on his way to Rome. At the time of the writing of his first letter, Peter indicates in verse 5:13 that he is in “Babylon” with Mark. Babylon was filled with evil and so was Rome. It is likely that Peter is using Babylon as a way of saying that he is in Rome to protect the Church in Rome and himself from Roman persecution. Peter’s first epistle was written about AD

63, in the last decade of his life, just before a great persecution of Christians under Nero broke out in Rome in AD 64. Peter was martyred just a few years later, about AD 67.

Peter's first letter is a message of hope for believers, and that hope is rooted in the matchless suffering and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Peter emphasizes the necessity of living lives worthy of Christ in a hostile pagan society. Peter goes so far as to say that his readers are "aliens" living in a land that does not know God or Christ. Thus, the Christians of Asia Minor would have been subject to social ostracism, slander, and police action instigated by the Jews who resisted the gospel and caused so much trouble for the Apostle Paul. The Christians of Asia Minor, like Moses, were, to some extent, strangers in a strange land. While they likely had been born where they resided, their newfound faith in Christ made them citizens of heaven. Just as in the first century when Christians were strangers in a strange land, so too, we are strangers in a strange land in our own country. The Church, God's moral code, and the things of God are increasingly marginalized in our increasingly secular, post-modern, post-Christian pagan culture. So, there is much we can learn from Peter's First Letter.

Exposition

Peter begins our sermon text with, therefore. The word *therefore* refers back to the phrase "fervently love one another from the heart," which is found in the final verse of our Scripture reading. Peter begins our sermon text by reminding early Christians of a very important aspect of Christian life and that we must have special love for our brothers and sisters in Christ that flows from the heart. The word *fervently* used in connection with the type of love we are supposed to have for our brothers and sisters in Christ is an athletic term meaning continually, intensely, and earnestly.

So why was the love of the brethren such a big issue in the early Church? As I mentioned another time, the early Church was filled with very religious Jews who became followers of Christ and Gentiles who, a few months earlier, might have been engaged in pagan religions and the worldly living of their time. There was a culture clash in the early Church and it could only be overcome if the disciples behaved and believed as true disciples of Christ.

Do you think there are cultural differences in the Church throughout the world? Of course, there are, but there are also cultural differences within our own Church. I'm sure there are widely differing political views. I'm sure there are differing theological views. I'm sure there are differences in views based on the generation we were born in and how we grew up. So yes, there were big cultural and other differences among the early Christians that Peter is addressing, and that remains true to this day in our melting pot society that provides us with far greater mobility than would have been experienced in the first century.

The Church is composed of people from diverse backgrounds, and for the Church to be united, we must find our unity in Christ conforming all things to His teaching and example. So Peter says, we must rid ourselves of anything un-Christlike that destroys the unity of the Church. Peter specifically calls his hearers to rid themselves of five sins relating to attitudes and speech that, when they are present, drive a wedge between believers in a church and destroy the love of the brothers and sisters in Christ. Malice is wicked ill-will. Deceit is deliberate dishonesty. Hypocrisy is pretended piety and love. Envy is an evil blend of resentment and discontent. And slander is making false, damaging statements about others, which amounts to backbiting lies. When we lay out the definitions of the words that Peter is using here, we quickly can see how damaging this sinful conduct would be to the Church and that it has no place in the Church.

Instead, Peter says, we should long for the pure milk of the word, which is the imperishable, un-watered down Word of God. The Church is a new creation of God and Christ, and the early Christians needed to make a decisive break from the past. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "...if anyone is in Christ, *he is* a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. We expect to encounter these five sins of attitude and speech in

the world, but they have no place in the Church, and I believe any church that harbors them is destined for death.

Peter moves from the need for purity and unity in the Church to the middle of the passage. He refers to Christ as the living stone rejected by men but precious and choice in the sight of God. Christ is the living stone because He is an eternal being who has life in Himself, and He gives eternal life to others. He is a stone because He is the one upon whom the Church is built. In verse 5, Peter says that we, too, are living stones because we have received life from Christ, and we, too, are built into the spiritual house of God as a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices. We will come back to that later.

This metaphor of Christ as a stone is found in the Messianic prophecies of the OT, and Peter cites several of these stone passages in the next three verses, where we learn much about Christ. In verse 6, Peter cites Isaiah 28:16, where the stone is choice and precious, indicating its great value to God. In verse 7, Peter quotes Psalm 118:22, where the stone is identified as the stone the builders rejected, which has become the chief cornerstone. This refers to the rejection of Christ by the Nation of Israel, and now the spiritual house of God is no longer being built through the Nation of Israel. Instead, God's kingdom is being built by Church that is built on Christ, who is the chief cornerstone. Finally, Peter cites Isaiah 8:14, which describes the stone as a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense. The Jewish leaders stumbled over Jesus. They ignored the obvious signs that He was the Messiah sent by God and rejected Him. Because of their rejection of Jesus, they suffered personal eternal condemnation and the destruction of their temple and nation in AD 70.

Moving to verse 9, we come to the high watermark of this passage, where Peter opens the eyes of the readers as to their true identity in Christ. Peter says this of the Church: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a Holy nation, a people for *God's* own possession so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;" So I have a question for you. Who are the chosen people of God? You might answer the Jews, and that would be correct, but here Peter applies the term "chosen people" to the Church which is composed of Jews and Gentiles.

Not only that, Peter says many other things about the Church which were formerly used to describe Israel. Not only is the Church a chosen people, but it is also a royal priesthood, a Holy nation, and a people for God's own possession. As I explained last week, God's plan of salvation has been at work down through the ages since the fall of Adam and Eve when God promised the Messiah, who would destroy the work of Satan. God raised up Israel to deliver His written Word and His incarnate Word, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, to the world.

In Isaiah 49:6, God says through the prophet Isaiah that it would have been too small a thing to send the Messiah Jesus Christ just to bring salvation to the Jews. Instead, God used Israel to bring about the Messiah as a Savior for the entire world. You're not going to put the best major league homerun hitter in a minor league game because the minor league game is too inconsequential; it is not important enough. In the same way, God would not send His Son into the world just to save Israel, a nation the size of New Jersey. God had much greater designs for His Son, and so He sent Him to save the world.

Israel was not the endgame of God's plan of salvation. The Church is the endgame, but the Church is a product of the work of the Messiah who came from Israel. God is not done with Israel, but that is a sermon for another day. For now, we conclude that it is not surprising that Peter refers to the Church as a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a Holy nation who are a people for God's possession. This ties in perfectly with Titus 2:14, a verse that featured prominently in last week's sermon, which tells us that Jesus sacrificed Himself to purify a people for Himself, for His own possession, eager for good deeds.

The Church is the people of God destined to be in eternal relationship with the Father and the Son, and thus, the Church must be composed of royal priests and Holy people. Dear friends, this passage is talking about you. This is who you are in Christ. In the second half of verse 9, we see God's purpose for the Church, and that is to proclaim the excellencies of God, who called us out of darkness through Christ. Peter is saying here something very similar to what Jesus says in Matthew 5:16 at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven." When we do good works in the name of God and when we proclaim God's excellencies, we bring God glory, we make Him known, we spread the gospel, and we become instruments in expanding God's kingdom. Moreover, the right response to God's mercy is to proclaim God's excellencies to the world. We've been called out of darkness into light, which is the truth and mercy of God, for the purpose of proclaiming the excellencies of God. God is calling us to join in His kingdom expansion program of evangelism because, as we learned last Sunday in Revelation 7, God wants a multitude from every nation that no one can count in His eternal heaven.

So, what exactly are the excellencies of God that He wants us to proclaim? Our God is a good, loving, and merciful God. Our God is the creator and sustainer of the universe. He holds the lives of every person in the palm of His hand. By His mercy, He has sent His Son to offer salvation to the world, and now, as Paul says in Romans 10:13, all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. The world needs to know about our God and His excellencies, because many will perish who do not know Him. Many will perish because they have never met anyone who lived and loved like Jesus did. Many will perish because they have never met anyone who could explain the truth and rational basis of our Christian faith. Many will perish in skepticism, confusion, and despair because they have not heard about Jesus who saves us. We are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, and a Holy people, saved to serve our King and to make Him known. Will Second Congregational Church survive another hundred years? I believe it depends on whether the people of this church are an effective tool that can be used by God in spreading the gospel.

In the Old Testament, the priest interceded before God, offering sacrifices for the people. The Levitical priests were intermediaries between God and Israel. But something dramatic and momentous happened at the death of Jesus on the cross as recorded in Matthew 27:51. Matthew writes, "And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom...." The veil in the temple was a 60-foot tall curtain at the entrance to the holy of holies where the Ark of the Covenant was housed in the temple of Jesus' day. Only the high priest was allowed to go behind the veil to enter the holy of holies once per year, on the Day of Atonement, when blood was sprinkled for the sins of the people. Notice that the veil or curtain was torn from top to bottom by God, symbolizing that access to God's presence is available to all believers. No human could tear a 60-foot-tall curtain from the top. This was an act of God. Thus, we are now all priests of God through the blood of Christ for the purpose of ministering to this fallen world, making the excellencies of God known to the fallen world around us. Who could make this stuff up? No one could make it up. It is the truth of God revealed by His apostles, who were messengers of God empowered by the Spirit to spread the gospel of salvation across the world.

Next, we need to consider how we can proclaim the excellencies of God. For some Christians, just like Vegas, what happens in Church stays in Church. But God would have us proclaim His excellencies. As I mentioned another time, some Christians are stealth Christians. Stealth aircraft go undetected, never alerting anyone of their presence. So too, stealth Christians go undetected because any knowledge they have of Christ is their best-kept secret. Perhaps they are ashamed to let others know that they believe in and follow Jesus. They have

no fear of shame for following Jesus because no one will ever know that they are following Jesus.

That, my friends, is not what God wants. In Luke 9:26, Jesus says that when He returns, He will be ashamed of anybody who is ashamed of Him and His words. When King Jesus returns, we want Him to be pleased with how we have served Him. God wants us to be bold in our Christian witness. God wants us to make the gospel and His excellencies known to the world so that sinners in need of a Savior will turn to Him. Listen to what Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:3-4, "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." God wants all people to be saved and to come to know Him. And He has ordained that you, as a follower of Jesus Christ, have a major part to play in spreading the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ in our homes, schools, communities, and beyond.

We are to make God's excellencies and offer of salvation known by our good deeds and proclamation of the gospel, which bring glory to God and make Him known to the world so the world will turn to Him. God wants to save your children, your extended family members, your friends, and your neighbors. No Levitical priesthood is needed because you are now the priesthood to minister to the world and point them to our high priest, Jesus Christ, who is seated at the right hand of the Father who is in heaven. We make God and His Son known to all around us by our deeds done for His glory, by our words spreading the Word of God to the world, and by the application of our time and financial resources, supporting the local Church and other Christian organizations and missionaries to spread the gospel of salvation in Christ throughout the world.

I was poking around the other day and found that I had four unused gift cards. "Are your unused gift cards gathering dust? You may be able to exchange those cards for cash. Gift cards are popular, especially around the holidays, but the strange thing is that many Americans don't use their cards. To that point, 47% of U.S. adults have at least one unused card, according to a 2023 Bankrate [survey](#). Nationwide, those unused balances are worth \$23 billion, the report found. Their average value is \$187 a person."

As God's children, we have been given many invaluable gifts. God's love has been deposited in our lives through salvation that brings us forgiveness, healing, joy, peace, and reconciliation with God. We have direct line access to God, and as royal priests, we enter the holy of holies and have unhindered access to the Father and the Son, not through intermediaries. And as we learn in Philippians 4:13, we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Do you believe that? You should. It is made clear to us in the Word of God. Each day, we encounter people in need of forgiveness, healing, joy, peace, and reconciliation to God. Each day, we meet people in need of a Savior. Each day, we meet people who need to know the excellencies of God.

Yet, every day, like the unused gift cards, we fail to use the resources, talents, and gifts God has given us to reach the world. We have the riches of the Kingdom of Heaven at our disposal and the calling of God to use them to impact our world. But like so many consumers, we put the gifts and callings of God away in a drawer and forget about them. Pull them out! Redeem them! Experience the riches of your new life in Christ! As Paul writes in Philippians 4:19, "... God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus." God would have us conduct ourselves with wisdom in the world, as Paul says in Colossians 4:5, making the most of every opportunity. Dear friends, use your resources and gifts to make the excellencies of God known to the world, and in so doing, you will store up treasure in heaven where moth or rust cannot destroy (Matthew 6:19-20). Amen.