

First Peter: Fashioning the People of God

1 Peter 1:22–2:10

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Our next passage in the book of First Peter is chapter 1:22 through 2:10. The apostle has, to this point, had a vertical focus. *Lifting us up to God, to the hope of heaven, to the coming of Christ in glory.* Here, we have a shift to the horizontal, not exclusively, but there is a new emphasis on the relationships we have with one another in the body of the Christ. And on the house that God is building. We will make 3 points. First, in 1:22 through 2:3, Gospel Growth. Second, in 2:4-10 we shall speak both of the Spiritual House and of the Spiritual Sacrifices.

I. Gospel Growth

First, then, gospel growth. In chapter 1, verse 22, we read: having purified your souls by obedience to the truth. A decisive action has taken place in the lives of these, and all, Christians. A once for all cleansing – having purified yourselves. *We were washed, we were sanctified* Paul says. The book of Hebrews says: *we were sanctified once and for all time, by the offering of Christ.* And Peter himself had already told us: *we are elect through the sanctifying work of the Spirit.*

Now, how did this purification occur? It occurred by what the text calls, your obedience to the truth. Or, what Peter has already called: obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling with his blood. In short, this purification comes about by our embrace of the gospel. Obedience to the truth here means faith. Faithful reception, trust in the gospel message. Paul preaches the gospel, Romans 1 tells us, to bring about the obedience of faith. The obedience which consists of faith. Jesus says believing in him is THE work we must do. The law says: do this in live. The gospel says: if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. It is this obedience to the truth that Peter has in mind. For the gospel is called “the word of truth” in Colossians, and in James, and in Ephesians. To believe the gospel is to obey the word of truth.

So, what is entailed when one converts to Christ, when one embraces the gospel? We have been purified, the text says, FOR a sincere brotherly love. Love one another earnestly, from a pure heart. Let’s look at the love we are called to here.

First, it is said to be “sincere.” This word means unhypocritical, genuine, without pretense. Let love be without hypocrisy, Paul says in Romans 12. A sincere “brotherly love,” because the word is Philadelphia. Philadelphia means that the church is a kinship group, a family. This was a completely ridiculous claim in pagan antiquity. Lucian, the ancient Greek writer, said of Christians, with a sneer: Their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another. It is an astonishing thing this brotherhood without blood bonds. Without in any way despising one’s natural family (though it is relativized), something new is here which transcends it.

So, the imperative here is: love one another deeply, from the heart. Deeply means earnestly. The word connotes intensity. Enduring, energetic activity. The word is used of Jesus in Gethsemane where we are told that, being in agony, he prayed more *earnestly*. And this love is to be from a pure heart. That is, without ulterior motives. Since you and your heart have been purified by the gospel of grace, then love one another from a pure heart.

We get another indicative beginning in v.23: Since you have been born again not of perishable seed but of imperishable. We are born not of blood, nor of human will, but of God. The life-giving and abiding Word of God, heard in the gospel, by the breath of the Spirit, is what begets us to life. The Word which, in conjunction with the hovering Spirit, created with world, is the same word which recreates us, resurrects us from the dead, shines in the darkness of our hearts, showing us the glory of God in the face of Christ.

This is beautifully put in James 1: Of his own will he begot us by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. Then Peter cites Isaiah 40, contrasting our fleeting mortality with the Word, which lives and abides forever.

“All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.”

There is no despair over our condition, because of that last “but” – but the Word of the Lord abides forever. And this word, Peter says at the end of v.25, is the good news that was preached to you. And thus, having celebrated the life-giving Word of the gospel, Peter switches back to an imperative. The first imperative was positive. It was about sincere, earnest brotherly love. This imperative is related, but its negative. Its about the kinds of things we are going to have to get rid of, if we are to show forth the Philadelphia of the gospel.

So, chapter 2, verse one starts with a THEREFORE. Since you’ve been born again through the living and abiding word of God: Then, rid yourselves of all malice, and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. The image here is of changing clothes. Put away your soiled garments and put on Christ.

So, what has to go for those who live by the gospel? Malice is a general term for all sorts of evil. Deceit and hypocrisy are the opposite of the pure and sincere love we are called to. Envy is a vicious, insidious hatred of the good and prosperity of others. Slander often flows from envy. It lies while pretending to tell the truth.

The main point of this list of vices is that they all poison the social life of the church. They are corrosive, community destroying evils. We must rid ourselves of ALL of them and walk in brotherly love. It turns out that, having been washed, and purified, and born anew, does not perfect us immediately. There remains a web of deep, twisted, entrenched and subtle evils, which must be acknowledged, engaged, put to death, and laid aside. The gospel which purified us once for all of these things, is the gospel which will cleanse us of them daily, and progressively, over time.

Having put off these vices, the apostle continues: Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk. Milk is not being contrasted with meat here. Rather it being used as a wholesome, health-giving image of what we all need to live. This is the milk of the Word, the same Word which begets you, the Word of God in the gospel, the word that was preached to you. This milk is pure. It is not corrupted by deceit. It is undiluted.

And notice we are to LONG for this milk. If we are BORN again, then will crave this the way a baby craves its mother's milk. For this is spiritual milk, by which we grow up into our salvation. The same gospel by which you were converted, is the gospel by which you stand, in which you walk, and by which you grow. We NEVER, NEVER get beyond the gospel. Christ is not only our justification; he is our sanctification. In Christ, we have, Peter continues, tasted that the Lord is good. In Christ, we are allured by the kindness of God.

II. A Spiritual House

Our second point is a Spiritual House. Verse 4: As you come to him. All of this is predicated on a people that comes to, and is coming to, Christ. The gospel creates a community. The Word has brought us to the risen Christ, who is described here as a LIVING STONE. He is a LIVING stone, because he is Raised, he is alive forevermore, and thus is the source and fount of life. And he is a stone, of which the Lord says in v.6: See, I lay in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.

This is a citation from Isaiah 28 where God promises to construct a new temple, on a new foundation. Christ is, vv.7 and 8 say, citing Psalm 118: *the stone which the builders rejected, the stone which has become the cornerstone. A stone that causes people to stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.* Jesus tells a

blistering parable against the Jewish leaders in Matthew 21 (Mk. 12, Lk 20) – the parable of the tenants. And he cites this material at the climax of the parable.

Here are his words. “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? ⁴³ “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. Peter is citing the OT to remind his hearers of Jesus’ own warning using these texts.

Let us notice a few things about this stone. First, Christ is the stone which was rejected by men. Rejected by men in general (v.4) and rejected by the builders, the Jewish leaders (v.7). And these Christians are themselves experiencing some rejection. So, Peter is encouraging them – and us - with the fact that the living Stone, the cornerstone, was also rejected.

Second, though rejected by men, this Stone is chosen by God and precious. We are told this twice, once in v.4, and once in v.6. Precious here means honored, highly valued. As in “you were redeemed not with perishable things, but with the precious blood of Christ.” Christ is the chosen and precious One, and you too, are now, v.9 says: A chosen people. Like Israel, elect not by any virtue we possess, but only by the unfathomable love/inscrutable will of God. Peter’s point is that we share Jesus’ dual fate of being rejected yet elect.

The third thing to see about this stone is that it cannot be ignored, it lies in the path of everyone. To those who believe, v.7 says: this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe the stone functions in the same way it functioned for the Jewish leaders. But it cannot simply be discarded. For he is the *stone which causes people to stumble, and the rock that makes them fall*. Reaction to this stone determines the destiny of all men.

The fourth thing to see about this living stone is that it is the cornerstone, the stone laid first, the stone to which every other stone is aligned. And it is the cornerstone of the new eschatological temple, the spiritual house, that God is building. This is, of course, the church. Jesus said the Jerusalem temple would be destroyed and replaced with the temple of his own risen body. Thus, Christ THE living stone, is laid in Zion, as the first stone in the new temple, the cornerstone.

And we, who embrace the gospel, we also, like living stones, are built into that temple, compacted together into one superstructure, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself the cornerstone. This house now gathers in the elect from every nation, the scattered transients among the Gentiles. As v.10 puts it: *Once you were not A PEOPLE; but now you are the people of God*. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. This is a citation from Hosea – and in the original context it refers to the restoration of Israel. But Paul uses it in Romans 9, as Peter most likely does

here, to speak of the gathering of the Gentiles. Out of all the nations, God gathers us into what v.9 calls a holy nation. This holy nation, drawn from all the nations, is now God's own special possession, his unique treasure. That is the spiritual house.

III. Spiritual Sacrifices

Finally (third point). Spiritual Sacrifices. The imagery here is elastic. We are not only the temple it turns out, that we are the priests who serve and offer sacrifices in the temple. A spiritual house has spiritual people, who offer spiritual sacrifices. Verse 5 says: we are being built together into a spiritual house TO BE a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Let us unpack this a little. First, we who are a holy nation, are a holy priesthood. 'Holy' here means created by, and consecrated by, the Holy Spirit. This is, what has been aptly called, the priesthood of all believers. There is no special caste of priests in the New Covenant. All Christians are priests. Male, female, slave, free, Jew, Greek, black, white, rich, or poor. We offer spiritual sacrifices, meaning sacrifices enabled and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The whole of the Christian life is priestly work, a spiritual, sacrificial offering unto God.

Paul says, in Romans 12, that, in view of the mercy of God, we are to: offer our bodies/selves as a living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is our spiritual or rational worship. We are priests, and in a profound way, we are the offerings given up to God. Christ gave himself up as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God, and we offer ourselves in him. These sacrifices are not limited, of course, to acts of public or private worship. They include the whole consecrated life of the believer. Paul speaks of the gifts sent to him by the Philippians as a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

He speaks of his whole apostolic ministry of the gospel, in Romans 15, as priestly service in which he is presenting the Gentiles as an offering acceptable to God. And all our offerings are, the end of v. 5 says: acceptable to God THROUGH Jesus Christ. His role as high priest is never eclipsed or bypassed. Nothing we offer is acceptable in itself. *Everything we have and offer is mingled with vice, Calvin says.* All is gathered up, perfected, and presented by Jesus Christ to the Father in the Spirit. We are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own possession, that we may, v.19 says, proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness, into his marvelous light.

The Word of God, through the Spirit, summons us out of the darkness, into the wonderous light of God. To proclaim – it's a kind of preaching --- to proclaim God's excellencies, his praises. So then, holy, royal priesthood of the Most High God: Declare his glory among the nations. Through all creation his triumph sing.

Till all earth's peoples bow in adoration. And Jesus Christ be everlasting King.
Amen.

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