

Fervent And Pure Love

1 Peter 1:22-25

I. Purified Souls

A Problematic Verse

“Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart” (1 Peter 1:22)

This verse is a bit problematic; even for theologians who generally agree. It is not problematic in the respect that it changes their theology. It is problematic in the respect that there is disagreement on what this one particular verse is teaching. It might mean a number of things, but logic dictates that it can only mean one thing. I don't want to spend a great deal of time contending with the difficulty but it goes something like this:

Salvation

“Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit” might refer to salvation. Even though only God can save us, our salvation is sometimes alluded to in this manner. Later in this very epistle, Peter writes, **“For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Peter 4:17).** So we see Peter referring to the gospel as something that needs to be obeyed. But if the gospel is the good news that Jesus came to seek and save that which was lost, how can good news be obeyed? If I were to say to you that a great, great grandparent whom you didn't even know died and left you a million dollars, how would you obey that? But, as we discussed in previous weeks, the imputed righteousness of Christ (which is His crediting His righteousness to our account) cannot be separated from His imparted righteousness, which evidences itself in a change in our behavior. This is why those who are genuinely saved know Christ as Lord and Savior. These two are so linked that both Peter and Paul in 2 Thessalonians 1:18 refer to our response to the gospel as obedience. This is how some understand this verse. I mention this because it might be right (and theologically speaking it is acceptable) but I personally think that it means something different.¹

Sanctification

For a number of reasons that I won't go into I think that Peter's meaning is more similar to what we read in James 4:8 and 1 John 3:2,3.

“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse *your* hands,

¹ This is why it is important not to allow one verse to determine your theology. Sound theologians may differ on what they think individual verses mean, but they don't, as often, disagree on theology that comes from a comprehensive study of the scriptures as a whole.

you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (James 4:8).

“Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.³ And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:2,3).

I believe the issue before us this morning is sanctification. Christians are called to purify themselves. It is what we see in both Peter and James as they quote from the Old Testament that Christians are to “be holy”. ‘Purify’ is from the root word ‘holiness’. I don’t think Peter is talking about some stage of holiness since that is unknown to the teachings of scripture and it would be unreasonable to assume that all the pilgrims of the dispersion had reached that level.

Sincere Brotherly Love

I think Peter is simply talking about logical steps of growth that Christians take. Recognizing all the while that Christian growth is by the power of the Holy Spirit. This purification comes by obeying the truth and it should be no mystery to Christians that God’s word is truth (John 17:17). The word and the Spirit had so worked in the hearts of these Christians that they had a sincere brotherly love for their Christian brothers and sisters.

II. Pure And Fervent Love

A Different Kind of Love

Peter has been indicating what has happened but in the final part of the verse we see the imperative. The call to these Christians is to go on to love one another fervently with a pure heart. It is worthy of note that Peter uses two different words the in Greek for love. He has indicated that these Christians do have a sincere brotherly love (phileo -- philadelphia) but now he challenges them to have fervent and pure (agape) love.

This might bring our attention back to a conversation Peter had with Jesus in the last chapter of the Gospel of John (21:15-19). You might recall that Jesus asked Peter three times whether or not Peter loved Him (the first two of those three times Jesus uses the word agape.) Peter, perhaps a bit broken due to his recent failure in denying Jesus three times responds to Jesus’ questions by saying he does love Jesus but each time using the word phileo. So what is the difference?

Phileo

Some versions of the Bible translate the word ‘phileo’ as affection. Agape is a much deeper and stronger form of love. It doesn’t require much effort on my part, for example, to love the members of our own church. The Holy Spirit has so sanctified our relationships that we pray for one another and encourage one another. This brotherly

love is, in a way, a natural outpouring of an affectionate relationship. I needn't exercise vast amounts of energy in the area of intellect or will in order to love these children who receive the covenant sign of God. It is easy. It flows.

Agape

Agape love is not always such an easy love. Agape love is deep-seated and complete. It is intelligent and purposeful. William Hendriksen in defining agape love writes that it is a love,

“which the entire personality (not only the emotion, but also the mind and the will) plays a prominent part, which is based on esteem for the object loved or else on reasons which lie wholly outside of this object; while phileo indicates (or at least tends in the direction of) spontaneous natural affection, in which the emotion play a more prominent role than either the intellect or the will.”

Peter may have had strong feelings for Jesus but was not confident enough to admit to the Savior, face to face, that he had an agape love.

Fervent and Pure Heart

Getting back to the verse in question Peter is acknowledging the existing phileo love that these Christians have for each other, but since affection is fleeting Peter is challenging them to go onto a deeper agape love. Peter adds the adverb fervently which comes from a verb which means to “stretch out the hand.” Thus it means to be stretched out. So a fervent love might be compared to a young man courting his sweetheart. He doesn't merely treat her nicely when she happens by. He pursues her.

He then adds “from a pure heart.” In other words we shouldn't have hidden motives in our love for others. This may be the most difficult aspect of love to discern. The idea of loving someone with no idea of reciprocation is radically inconsistent with human nature.

Excel Still More

So brotherly love is wonderful but what we should strive for is the kind of love that God demonstrates toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Christian agape love is most easily measured when we consider our disposition toward those who are least attractive to us. It is truly a high calling that Peter lays before us in this verse. I am reminded of the challenge of Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians. He writes,

“Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more” (1 Thessalonians 4:1).

We aren't to be satisfied with loving only those for whom we have an affection; even if it is an affection of Christian brotherly love. We are to excel still more. We are to love others the same way God loves us, with no assignable cause save His own good pleasure. This may be why Peter immediately appeals to their current spiritual state; that of being regenerated.

III. Born Again

“having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever” (1 Peter 1:23).

It's Not Doing Something

I spoke in detail on what it means to be born again when Peter mentioned it in verse three so I will not go into detail again. Suffice it to say that being born again is not something a person does. When Jesus told Nicodemus that a man must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven He wasn't telling Nicodemus to do something. He was merely stating a theological fact. When Peter writes, “having been born again.” It is in the present, passive participle. We are passive in being born again. It is something that God does to us. Spiritually, we were dead and He made us alive (Ephesians 2).

God's Agape Love

Among other things, in order for us to genuinely being to appreciate the call to agape love we must recognize the monergistic nature of our salvation. God chose to love us and sent His Son to die for us and we contributed nothing. God doesn't love us because we're smart, pretty, congenial or humble. Our prayers to God, our love for God and our very faith in God are a result of God's love for us and the effective work of the atoning work of our blessed Savior on the cross of Calvary.

Faith Comes by Hearing

This new spiritual life into which Christians have been born is not of corruptible seed but incorruptible. There is nothing temporary about it. And the means by which we enter into this new life -- the way God ordinarily saves sinners -- is through His everlasting word (logos). Romans 10:17 tells us that faith comes by hearing and Romans 1:16 tells us that the gospel (or the good news) is the power of salvation. In John 10 Jesus teaches that His sheep hear His voice. What we learn from this is that the elect of God respond to the gospel because, by the grace of God, they recognize it to be God's truth. So the power of the cross is applied by the message of the cross. It is the eternal, ultimate truth. It is the truth that sets men free. And everyone and everything that pits itself against God's truth is compared to the withering grass.

Man may have his fifteen minutes of fame, but in the course of eternity that fifteen minutes is but the twinkling of an eye. Peter finishes this section by writing,

IV. All Flesh is Grass

“because “All flesh is as grass, And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, And its flower falls away,²⁵ But the word of the LORD endures forever.” Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you” (1 Peter 1:24-25).

A Way That Seems Right

Man is compared to grass and his finest achievements are compared to the flower of the grass. The grass withers and the flower falls away. How critical it was to Jesus and the apostles to keep the thinking of the world clearly separated from the thinking of Christ’s kingdom. The Proverbs teach us **“There is a way that seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death” (Proverbs 14:12)**. The words of man abide but for a moment but the words of God abide forever. The way of man is death. Even the way that seems right to him. But the way of God is life everlasting.

The Pure Milk

In the next chapter Peter will exhort his readers to desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby. The word of God is a life-giving and refining seed. Contained within the holy scriptures is the standard of righteousness for virtually every venue in life and the saving message of Jesus Christ who frees us from the judgment of violating that standard.

Keeping the Gospel

Peter writes, **“Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you”** The covenant community of God lives or dies according to it’s message. When the church loses the gospel it will lose the power of salvation. But if it keeps the gospel – if we hold it as dear and precious – if we teach it to our children and maintain the know-how and courage to, as Paul writes, pull down the strongholds, cast down the argument and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ – then the lampstand of Christianity will burn bright – the salt will maintain it’s savor and men will be blessed.