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How Easter People Are to Live in a Good Friday World: Together

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TEXT: 1 Peter 1:22-2:10 (ESV)

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 all 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. 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 honor 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 offense.” 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 marvelous light. 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.

More and more Christians these days seem to be calling into question the value of the local church. Declining worship attendance figures attest to this, but some have even said that they love Jesus, but they're not so hot on his church. I've had conversations with people who profess Jesus as their Savior, but they are disconnected from church

and not really interested in being part of a local congregation for a variety of reasons. In our highly individualistic society, it appears that people seem to be more interested in their personal salvation and the cultivation of their own spiritual lives. And they find it easy to grasp the relevance of Jesus, but find it more difficult to see the relevance of his church. Then, when they observe the problems and failures within the church, it becomes even easier to think that, "Well, the church must be somewhere on the fringe of God's plan, a divine afterthought of sorts. But it's not a big deal."

Well, nothing could be further from the truth, according to today's passage from Peter. Easter people are not meant to follow, worship, and serve the risen Christ by themselves in a Good Friday world that needs Jesus. That goes against God's very intentions for those who trust in His Son, Jesus Christ. We are to live connected as the family of God. And Peter reminds us of that truth right off the bat. "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've been born again of imperishable seed through the good news that was preached to you." Notice that this is all written in the plural. He is writing to a local congregation, perhaps more than one. He describes their faith in the good news of Jesus as their obedience to the truth that has made them pure in God's sight. Believers, you see, are cleansed from unrighteousness. God views them as He views his son because they are covered by Christ's righteousness through His sacrifice for our sins at the cross.

And this purity before God has been given for brotherly love, we're told. Brotherly love is a family sort of image, living harmoniously as a family, as brothers and sisters. You see, human beings face two fundamental problems because of sin. Not only were they alienated from God, but they were alienated from each other. And that was never God's intention when he created the world. Humans were created to have a loving relationship with God and with other human beings, and sin wrecked it. So, God's plan of salvation through Jesus addressed both of these issues. He reconciled us to himself through the cross, and he also reconciled us to each other to be brothers and sisters as the family of God.

And so, Peter instructs that brothers and sisters in Christ are to go about the task of loving one another earnestly, meaning intensely, devotedly. The word for love here is *agape* love. It's not about feelings, but about the will which is committed to do everything you can to help your brother or sister become everything God intended

them to be. It's Jesus-style love. It's taking care of one another by serving, encouraging, sharing, praying, looking out for, forgiving, being patient and kind. Easter People are rescued by Jesus for this, for living this kind of thing out as the church. And there are some good reasons behind this.

First of all, Jesus, our master commanded it. "Love one another as I have loved you," Jesus said. Why? "By this, all people will know that you are my disciples." Loving one another will attract people to Jesus and his kingdom. As Bible commentator William Barclay once observed, "More people have been brought into the church by the kindness of real Christian love than by all the theological arguments in the world. And more people have been driven from the church by the hardness and ugliness of so-called Christianity than by all the doubts in the world." Where someone else has said: "A cold church, like cold butter, will not spread."

Another reason is that you're going to spend eternity together as Easter people. Since you've been born again through the imperishable seed of the gospel, the good news of salvation through Jesus, Peter points out, you're headed to Heaven with one another. So work at appreciating and supporting each other during your trip. And the truth is, on that trip, we need each other for support and encouragement in order to persevere in the midst of the challenges of living for Jesus in a Good Friday world that rejects the Gospel of Christ and contains all kinds of sufferings and things that cause us fear and doubt. I like this statement from author Max Lucado, which describes how believers best face the doubts and questions that occur within them along the way. He writes,

Questions can make hermits out of us, driving us into hiding. Yet the cave we hide in has no answers. Christ distributes courage through community. He dissipates doubts through fellowship. He never deposits all knowledge in one person, but distributes pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to many. When you interlock your understanding with mine and we share our discoveries, when we mix, mingle, confess, and pray, Christ speaks.

A loving Christian community, then, is vital. It's an attractive witness for a sin-sick world to see, and it's a lifeline for believers in Jesus Christ. We actually need one another in order to grow in our salvation and effectively serve Christ in the world.

Peter then instructs believers that this loving fellowship happens when the following three things happen. First, Easter people must rid themselves of those relationship wreckers that can happen in a church like malice, which means hostility, deceit,

dishonesty, hypocrisy, phoniness, envy, meaning jealousy and resentment and all slander, false and injurious statements; gossip about others. These are deadly. And we are reminded in this list that believers come into Christ's church carrying all kinds of baggage that causes this sort of behavior to occur: different backgrounds and traditions, old prejudices and sinful, self-centered attitudes that can make loving each other difficult and thus spoil the church and the purpose of the church when they're not kept in check. So, this stuff has got to go, Peter says. And of course, we know this is no easy task and that we'll never do it perfectly this side of Heaven. But neither is it impossible, since believers in Christ have the power of the Holy Spirit. They're born of that imperishable seed. They have the Holy Spirit within them to put those things away.

Next, after pointing out the things to get rid of, Peter gives more valuable instructions for maintaining and building a loving church. He says, "Like newborn infants, long for pure spiritual milk so that you may grow up into salvation if indeed you've tasted that the Lord is good." Born again believers need spiritual nourishment to carry out that sort of thing, like a baby needs milk. What is that pure spiritual milk that he's talking about? It's the gospel, the good news of Christ through which the Holy Spirit works to grow us in faith and love. Luther, in his small catechism, wrote of this. He said,

I believe that I cannot, by my own understanding or effort, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts and sanctified and kept me in true faith in the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it united with Jesus in one true faith.

That pure spiritual milk of the gospel of forgiveness in Jesus Christ has the power, you see, to soften believers' hearts, change our mindsets, and motivate loving actions towards others. It's conforming believers into the image of Jesus. As Paul says in the book of Romans.

Finally, finally, remember not only who you are in Christ, but also who your brother and sister in Christ is, and treat them as such. Peter points out, "As you come to Jesus, the living stone rejected by men but chosen and precious in God's sight..." This is the stone that was promised by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, he says. First of all, notice, he says the notice the you that he uses here is plural. So, he's talking to everyone. And "as you come" is implying continuous action, something you keep doing. I can't help then but think of this image of Christian believers coming to Jesus again and again in corporate worship as a family needing that pure spiritual milk of the gospel. Their

mindset being I need to hear the gospel sung and preached again and again and again. I leak and this feeds my soul and strengthens me to serve Jesus and reminds me of who I am and what my purpose is and what my fellow brothers' and sisters' purposes as well. "You yourselves, like living stones," Peter goes on to say, "are being built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ." As God was present in the Old Testament temple, now he has a new temple in which He resides. It's the gathered believers in Jesus Christ. It's his church. He comes and dwells among his people through His Holy Spirit and ministers to them and through them. And every living stone, every person made alive by trust in Jesus are built upon one another and upon the cornerstone of Jesus. And each one matters. And Jesus lays each living stone upon one another in order that believers might be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus.

Back in the Old Testament, only the temple priests had that kind of access to God. But now believers through Christ have been given access to God. They are now priests before God. No longer needed an intermediary to offer a physical sacrifice for atonement for them, because that has been made on their behalf by Jesus at the cross already. But now they can give spiritual sacrifices like singing and praising and praying and giving and serving and witnessing. Just think about that. Trusting in Jesus Christ, you are now a holy priest set apart to worship and serve God with the family of God. You're set apart, special, God's people. And so is the person sitting next to you in worship. Remember, that fellow believers have a common destination to their fellow travelers, as I said earlier, on their way to God's heavenly Kingdom because of Jesus, God's cornerstone. They will not be put to shame in the end, but they will be honored just like you, and welcomed because they built their lives on Jesus Christ as their cornerstone.

And then Peter completes his train of thought about remembering who and whose we are with this lofty view of the people of God, the Church of Christ. He says,

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 marvelous light. Once you were not a people, now you are God's people. Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

It's as if Peter is saying,

I know that there are some in the world who reject Jesus to their own peril and treat you as irrelevant nobodies or troublemakers to be ignored or quieted. But remember: they're wrong. Each and every one of you are a part of God's special community and great rescue plan for the world. You're God's special people.

And within this context, Peter seems to also be saying,

As you worship and serve God together, then, with all your personal, selfish, and prideful baggage still tugging away at your heart and mind because of the sin in you, tempting you to gossip or put down brothers and sisters in the church, or even leave the church in disgust, remember again and again who they are in Christ and ask God to help you treat them as fellow living stones, holy priests, royalty, chosen people, God's possessions, fellow Proclaimers of the Excellency of God, just like you, through God's grace and mercy.

In other words, love them earnestly because you're in this together. As Easter people, do that together in the local Church of Christ, they are actually offering the world an attractive display of God's original intentions for the world and the life he wants to give all people through His son, Jesus Christ, at a life of belonging to God in one another, a life of love and service and joy in His presence.

I've caught a glimpse of this recently in a retirement community where I lead worship. A fairly large group of seniors faithfully come to the chapel on Sunday and sing their hearts out to the Lord, and they pray and say the creed and drink in and delight in the gospel message, their supportive conversation before and after the service between them. And all the while the door is open to the chapel and people will slowly walk by and look in curiously or stop in the hallway and observe. And sometimes someone will even come in and join us when the service is over. The little congregation then disperses into the various parts of the building renewed, kind of glowing with the light and joy and love of Christ. They're ready for another week of serving Jesus as a chosen holy priesthood in a Good Friday world.

So, I leave you with Peter's opening statement. Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart. Let's pray. Thank you, God, for the mercy you've given us through Jesus. And we thank you for calling us together to be your church. Empower us to love one another earnestly with pure hearts. Amen.