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1 Peter 1:22–2:3

Fifth Message

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BONDING HEARTS

SERIES: A PILGRIM'S LIFE IN AN ALIEN LAND

While we were on our way to Eastern Europe last year, a member of our team met a young Jewish man on the plane ride to Frankfurt. He shared the Lord with David, and told him of our upcoming ministry behind the Iron Curtain. When we arrived in Frankfurt airport, I called our group together and asked David to say a Hebrew blessing for us as we went our separate ways. (He was going on to Israel, while we were heading East.) “This is the only one I know,” he replied, and he recited in Hebrew: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together as *one*.” All of our team knew these words from the first verse of Psalm 133, and we sang this prayer of unity, together with David, there in the airport.

Before the Tower of Babel, mankind had one common language, but in his arrogant self-assertion, mankind in a societal revolt tried to storm heaven and become as God. God responded by confusing man's language. As a result, linguistic groups were formed; nations and nationalism splintered and spread, and racial, sexual and age divisions led to wars and competition between different peoples. But just as soon as these divisions first appeared, there also surfaced among men a deep longing to get rid of those barriers and live together as one in peace and harmony.

Psalm 133 is an expression of that hoped-for unity. The psalm also gives the means by which that unity will be accomplished.

**Behold, how good and pleasant it is
For brothers to dwell together as one.
It is like the precious oil upon the head,
Coming down upon the beard, Aaron's beard,
Coming down upon the edge of his robes.
It is like the dew of Hermon,
Coming down upon the mountains of Zion,
For there the LORD commanded the blessing—life forever.**

According to this prayer, mankind cannot in their own strength become as one. The United Nations cannot do it. No great leader can accomplish it. Oneness is a supernatural gift bestowed by the Spirit of God, of which the oil mentioned in Psalm 133 is a picture. Oil is poured on Aaron's head. It drips down over his face and onto his robes, touching every part of his life. This is what must occur if mankind is to become as one. It can only happen as a result of an outpouring of God's Spirit. And not only by God's Spirit, but by his Word, which he commands upon Zion. His Word falls like the morning dew, bringing life and refreshment. If mankind is to be one, the Spirit of God must be poured out on Mount Zion; then a new society, a new humanity will be established.

The author of our text today in First Peter, the apostle himself, was an eyewitness of and participant in the actual historical event when God reversed the curse of the Tower of Babel. That happened on the Day of Pentecost. On that day, Peter saw with his eye and heard with his ear the Spirit of God poured out upon that mountain. Present on that occasion were Jews from every nation, all of them speaking different languages, when God poured upon them the gift of tongues to establish the one humanity, one people filled with his Spirit, who spoke with one tongue. On Pentecost, a whole new creation was begun by the Spirit of God and the Word of God, and the dominant characteristic of that people was their unity of spirit.

This is Peter's theme this morning—community and love in the body of Christ. He has already documented for us God's great plan of salvation, past, present, and future, and we have looked at three of five commands which he gives us in response to this glorious salvation. Today we come to command number four: we must “*ferently love one another*.” When Peter wrote this letter, there was a great hunger for community. For three hundred years, the Greek philosophers had dreamed of a utopian age when all men would live as equals and share all things in common. Plato wrote about this in his *Republic*. But when this was attempted, the result was dismal failure. Then the Romans made attempts at community. They had their communal clubs, dining clubs, burial clubs, trade guilds, pagan clubs and taverns, all of which were based on common interest or class status. But fellowship in these societies was shallow, superficial, and immoral. Justin Martyr refers to their idol factories where the sculptors, though they claimed to be brothers, “are practised in every vice...even their own girls who work alongside them they debauch.”

It is no different today. Our culture has lost its sense of community. Ten years ago the American family, consisting of father, mother and children, comprised 44% of the living units in this country. Today that number has dropped to 27%. The divorce rate is a horrendous 50%. Yet there is a great yearning in our culture to belong. This is manifested in an extreme sense by the young runaways who try to lose themselves in our cities and end up working for pimps. Ask them why they are doing this and they will say, “He cares for me.” They are looking for community. Why do teenagers run away to join cults whose leaders are half crazy and whose doctrines are absurd? The answer, in one word, is, community, the need to belong.

In our text this morning, then, Peter unfolds the real tapestry of love and community in all of its biblical depth.

I. The Proper Standard Of Love (1:22)

Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart (NASB)

Here is the standard of love we should have toward one another in Christ: we are to “ferently love one another from the heart.” “Ferently” can mean “straining intensity,” or, “steady, constant.” Love takes effort! And it takes constancy; it should not be a part-time emotion. It should be genuine, and it should be “from the heart.” Our love should be genuine, not hypocritical. We cannot display one thing outwardly and feel something else inside.

The word “heart” is one of the most important theological words in the Old Testament. Its basic root refers to that part of life that is remote and hidden. We use the expression “the heart of the sea,” or, “the heart of the jungle.” The human heart is the most protected organ in the human body. There is an aspect of our lives that is deep and hidden from other people. And it is very easy to draw a veil over and protect our hearts. We can appear one way but inside we can quite easily be something else.

But here is God's standard of love, which he gave to his people in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul

and with all your might.” Peter’s standard for love and community is not new. He is merely repeating what God himself set forth in Deuteronomy. God, in his basic nature, is one. There is no internal division in him. He has complete integrity. What he says he will do he will do. And because God is that way, this is how he wants us to love him—with no internal division. He wants our whole heart, our whole life, all the hidden things, and we must respond with all our might. What a high standard God demands!

Once I counseled a fairly typical Silicon Valley couple who were having problems. The husband was a workaholic; the wife felt she wasn’t even second, but perhaps third or fourth on his list of priorities. When she told her husband of this, he said, “All right, what do you want? Should I be home at a certain time? Shall I call you first? What would you like me to do?” He went on to list a number of things which he thought might make her happy. Finally, I said to him, “Your wife doesn’t want any of those things. She wants you, your whole heart, but right now she doesn’t think she has your heart. Your work is your god.”

Before we can love one another properly, we must understand the kind of love that God requires of us. It must be genuine (from the heart), and it must be constant. But how do we do this? Is this just another law which we must obey? I discovered even in courtship that at times it was hard to love someone who was loveable. I had to ask myself, “How then can I love unlovable people?” Peter answers this question in the following verses.

II. The Basis For Love: Our New Birth (1:22-25)

Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of a seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God. For,

**“All flesh is like grass,
And all its glory like the flower of the grass.
The grass withers,
And the flower falls off,
But the word of the Lord abides forever.”**

And this is the word which was preached to you.

No flesh can produce this kind of love. We need a new purity and a new heart to do so. In order to love this way, from the heart, with fervency and constancy, says Peter, what is needed is a deep cleansing and purification of our old life and all its selfish ways. This came about, explains the apostle, when we accepted the gospel “in obedience to the truth,” and our lives were cleansed by the blood of Christ. Everything about the old selfish ways was forgiven and cleansed; we awake every morning forgiven and cleansed.

But we receive even more than a new purity when we receive Christ. He also gives us a new heart. And this is not a temporary change. This did not come into being by the choices or will of men (from “flesh”), whose commitments and glory are like the grass and the flower of the grass, which wither in adversity in the wind and the heat. Such is the commitment of mere men. But we have been born by a creative miracle, matching that which occurred in Genesis 1, when God spoke and by his creative word life came out of darkness and order out of chaos.

Peter quotes Isaiah 40, a very significant text, to make his point. This text speaks of Israel under the curse of the Deuteronomy covenant because she did not love God with her whole heart. She went after idols and committed apostasy. The theocracy was dead, the temple overrun, the land polluted. Israel, which was to be a light to the nations, was captive in Babylon, the center of world idolatry. But the prophet Isaiah came with a word of comfort for the people, saying that a messenger was

coming: “A voice is calling, Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness...”

This word had its spiritual fulfillment in the person of John the Baptist in the New Testament:

**Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.
Let every valley be lifted up,
And every mountain and hill be made low;
And let...
A voice says, “Call out.”
Then he answered, “What shall I call out?”
All flesh is grass and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
When the breath of the Lord flows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever. (Isa 40:3-8)**

John the Baptist announced a new King, God incarnate, who would come and do a creative miracle with the people of God, accomplishing what they themselves could not: He would love God with his whole heart; he would die on a tree for the sins of the people; and he would create by his word a new people of God who have one heart. This is what Jeremiah prophesied (Jer 32:39-40). These people would have a new heart which would enable them to love God with their whole heart. And all of this happened by the miraculous Word of God, which is living (it provides a continual source of life); it is abiding (it establishes new, permanent foundations); and it is everlasting (its nourishment will never fail to bring rich sustenance and eternal results).

All believers, says Peter, Jew and Gentile alike, are born again by this imperishable seed. It is not a seed of flesh (you do not have to be an Israelite to belong to the Kingdom), but you are now born of spirit and given a radical new heart that loves God like Jesus loves God. The Christian life is not lived by studying Jesus’ life and then trying to imitate him in the home or in the workplace. The Christian life, rather, is the life of Jesus given you that responds to the Heavenly Father and loves the way he loves. You have been born by that Word—a creative miracle.

The result is that we can love God with one heart in the New Covenant. This is exactly what happened in the church, as the book of Acts reports. The Spirit came upon believers, and immediately there was a fervent love for God and for one another, so much so that they freely gave up their possessions. A spirit of love transcended their circumstances and they brought their belongings to give to the poor. This tradition continued throughout the centuries. The church father, Tertullian, wrote following the revival in Africa that funds were given

to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls who were destitute of means and parents, and of old people now confined to the house, and such as have suffered shipwreck...or any who happen to be in the mines or banished to the islands of shut up in prison for their fidelity to God’s Church ...One in mind and soul, we do not hesitate to share our earthly goods with one another. All things in common among us except our wives.

Pliny the Younger, the Roman governor who persecuted the church, came to the same conclusion after investigating the church.

Christians make no impact on the world by going into combat with the world on the world’s terms. This is not the way the church advances the Kingdom of God. But when the world sees insignificant people like you and I filled with transcendent love for one another, that is when people want to become part of the church.

Church history shows that the second generation of church fathers departed from this and began writing apologies—critical, intellectual defenses of their faith. They argued with clarity and logic to try and con-

vert others. But in his excellent work, *Evangelism And The Early Church*, Michael Green says that to his knowledge not one convert came to Christ despite all this writing. He feels that what happened is that Christians became a little self-righteous and harsh. They lost this transcendent love which the apostles had for each other and for the world. This is why they lost their impact. I'm not saying that apologetics are not important, because they are, but when you go toe-to-toe with the world and you argue with their terms and their tools, you may win the argument but you will lose the war. Transcendent love, on the other hand, is what brings down the barriers and makes an impact for Jesus Christ.

Recently I asked our church plant manager to share at our men's study how he came to Christ. He said that he arrived in California a few years ago, having been banished from his native Poland. He had become heavily involved in the Solidarity union movement in that country and was imprisoned for a year. This did not deter his involvement, and so the Polish government gave him a choice of many years in prison or banishment from Poland. He decided to leave, and his family arrived in San Francisco some time later. He spoke no English, he had no money, he told us, and in addition, his wife was mad at him!

Then they met a woman in our body who has a ministry with refugees from Eastern Europe. She made a highway for this man and his family. She introduced him to a couple in our congregation, who invited them to stay with them as long as they had need. "Our home is your home," they told them. On their first Sunday living with this family, they all came to church here, although they could not understand a word of what was said. That didn't matter, he said, because they sensed that the congregation was filled with realism and love. This love is what brought him to Christ. This is the kind of love Peter is talking about.

The second necessity for a proper love is not only to know the proper standard, but to also know the basis for such love. In the New Covenant, such a high standard is indeed possible because of our new birth, which has given us a new nature. Thus we have been fully cleansed from our past, sinful ways, and now have a heart that responds to the living God. This has been made possible through the living Word of God, something no human effort could bring about.

So it is possible for us to love because there has been a radical change in our heart; we have a new nature which enables us to love this way. But we still struggle at times, don't we? Love grows cold. Our love for God grows cold. Our love for our spouses grows cold. Our love for strangers grows cold. Why is this?

Last week, our receptionist called me to speak to a street person who was looking for help. Because I felt I had been taken advantage of in similar situations a couple of times recently, before I met this man I pre-determined in my mind to send him to a local ministry that takes care of these types of needs. This ministry is very street-wise, and is careful not to give out money which may be used to buy drugs. This man, however, told me he needed a voucher for gas for his car as he was looking for work. We don't have gas vouchers, so I sent him along to this other ministry group, and he was on his way out of my office in 15 minutes. When I got home that evening, the Lord convicted me that, regardless of why this man visited me, I had never allowed my heart to open up to him. I was not willing to offer him my time to get to know him, to pray for him, perhaps to lead him to Christ. I had closed my heart, and I had to confess my sin to God.

Why do we fail so often? Peter is a realist. In this next section we will see that though we have been born again by means of an imperishable, divine seed that has given us a new, perfect spirit, other forces are at work, too, in this garden of our spirit. Sin, like weeds, does not need to be cultivated. Sin can stifle this new life which we possess. Our responsibility is to choke out the weeds which would seek to to this; and then, positively, to cultivate the new seed which indwells us. This explains the

conflict in the Christian life, and why love is not automatic. Yes, you are born again, but you must now begin to cultivate this new seed, as the apostle goes on to say in the next verses.

III. Cultivating Love (2:1-3)

Therefore, putting aside all malice and all guile and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, since you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

A. Starve The Flesh (2:1)

There are two things we must do to cultivate love: We must starve the flesh, and we must feed the spirit. Sin manifests itself in these terms which Peter uses—malice, guile, hypocrisy, envy, slander. Notice that all of these manifestations of sin are relational terms; they are things which destroy loving relationships. We don't have to work at them. They lurk in all of us, ready to engage themselves. Our job now is to put these sins aside.

Malice is probably a good general term for all of these things. This is just plain old wickedness. Malice is an attitude of self-seeking, self-grasping which, if indulged in, results in an act of wickedness which destroys fellowship in the community. We have an example of this in the book of Acts. In Acts 8, the magician Simon Magus saw the apostles laying hands on new converts and their receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. This man offered Peter some money so that he, too, might possess this gift. But Peter saw right through his motives. He said to him, "Repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray that if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity" (Acts 8:22). The church fathers report that Simon did not repent, however, but later went to Rome and presented himself as a god and demanded to be worshiped. He loved notoriety, and thought he could use money to accomplish his desires in the kingdom of God. This is the sin of malice.

The next two sins that Peter lists, guile and hypocrisy (the first an attitude, the second an action), I would describe as false actions of wickedness. Guile is deceit and cunning. The word is used in the Septuagint of Jacob, the master of deceit, who coveted his brother's blessing and employed deceit and trickery to get it. Later, Isaac said to Esau, who had been deprived, "Your brother came *deceitfully*, and has taken away your blessing" (Gen 27:35). Though Jacob desired a good thing, he used craftiness to get it, thus driving a wedge between him and his brother that remained for 20 years. At times we can appear very righteous, but what we are really doing is disguising our true intentions to get what we want. Our religious actions thus are a cover for wickedness.

Hypocrisy is a sin which comes naturally to all of us. When we talk about ourselves, we always put ourselves in a good light. This is especially true of any talk about our spirituality. The classic example of hypocrisy in the early church, which happened in the context of cultivating love, were the doings of Ananias and Saphira. Barnabas so loved the church he sold a field and presented the money as a gift to the apostles. When Ananias and Saphira saw how this enhanced the young man's reputation, they, too, sold a piece of property and pretended to hand all of the money over to the apostles. They had kept some of the money for themselves, which was not wrong, but they kept that hidden so as to deceive the church in their effort to enhance their reputation. But Peter saw through their scheme and the damage it would have done to the church, and the couple dropped dead at the feet of the apostle. Hypocrisy, wanting to appear in a better light than is true of us, kills fellowship in the church.

The last two sins are envy and slander. The sin of envy is manifested when the flesh cannot rejoice when others begin to advance or are blessed, but rather thinks ill of them for what they have, whether it be

material things or good reputation. We think that God has a finite number of blessings to give his children, therefore we envy others and feel, like children, that we must elbow our way past our peers to get our share of the goodies. This, too, destroys fellowship in the body of Christ.

Slander is when we use speech to give in to our envy and destroy someone's reputation by our words. This can occur even when what we say is true. But true love, rather than exposing the sins of others, instead draws a veil over them so that people appear in the best light. This is difficult area for me. With my analytical mind I see people's weaknesses and in a moment I can destroy someone's reputation.

So these are the things that we must starve. While we have an imperishable seed residing in us, a new nature and a new spirit, all this wickedness too lies inside, waiting for an opportunity to manifest itself. These are the things which we must starve and kill.

There is yet one other thing we must do.

B. Feed The Spirit (2:2-3)

"...like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, since you have tasted the kindness of the Lord."

We must cultivate and feed this new life which we possess. But what should we feed it with? If we turn to books on history, philosophy or sociology, even the writers of religious teachings, we will have to extract truth from error so that our souls are edified. It is not so when we read the Scriptures, says Peter. The Scriptures are pure and unadulterated. The Bible alone will feed your soul with pure food. That is why we, like newborn babes, should long for this pure milk. You mothers know that your infants long to be fed at mother's breast eight times a day! Believers should give themselves to the Word of God with the same intensity.

We had a great man in our midst who went to be with the Lord last year. When he was in his 30's, he decided that he would read through the Bible once every year, and for the next forty years he followed this practice. At the beginning of each year he would buy a new Bible and a journal and then embark on another year of feeding on the pure milk of God's Word. Anyone could see what this had done in his life, producing in him a gracious and loving spirit toward all. At his death, I decided to follow his example in reading through the Scriptures each year. I bought one of those new one-year Bibles and I have been reading daily. Although I don't remember everything I read, this is having a very cleansing effect in my life. Not only does it expose to me my sin, it also uncovers my motives, and keeps me humble, trusting God.

Reading the Scriptures cultivates love and causes growth in the Christian life. I cannot exhort you too strongly: Read the Word! When I get up in the morning, I don't want to see the newspaper or listen to the radio. What I long for is the pure, unadulterated milk of the Word of God for my first spiritual meal of the day.

What is our motive for doing this? Here it is: "Since we have tasted the kindness of the Lord," says Peter. Notice that he moves from the Word of God to the very life and grace of God himself. How do you grow to love someone? I have discovered that all we have to do on our men's retreat is ask two men to share their lives and the floodgates of love open up. When people share who they are, truthfully and transparently, you cannot help but love them. This is what God has done in his Word. He has designed it so that his life is mediated by his Word. So if you want your love for God and for others to grow, you must begin feeding on God's Word. This is where he has put his life. The reason we don't grow is that we are looking for this love in other places. How many of you singles enter a relationship looking for this kind of love only to be

disappointed? We place expectations on others which they cannot possibly meet. Even spouses fall into this trap.

In verse 2, Peter quotes David's word in Psalm 34. When he wrote this, David had no friends. He was being hunted, his life in danger, and he ended up in the territory of the Philistines. There he was forced to act like a madman to get out of a tight spot. All alone, in the cave of Adulam, he wrote about the glory of a man who meets God and the angel of the Lord encamps around him. "O, taste and see that the Lord is good," exclaimed David. We cannot cultivate love until we first have been loved by God, and God is waiting to love us through his Scriptures. There is a feast ready for us, but our appetites have been spoiled because we have been feeding the flesh, we have been feeding on other relationships.

If we starve the flesh, and feed the spirit, then this love will be cultivated in full measure.

It is now possible for us to love one another from the depths of our heart because of our new nature. God has created a new heart for us, one which can respond in obedience to him. But this new life, says Peter, must be fed in order to cultivate love. God has provided the richest and purest food, the living Word, to sustain it. This food quickens the soul; it does not give out; and it interacts with us continually in the depth of our being.

I want to leave us with three things. This passage ought to enlighten, encourage, and rebuke us with respect to our love for one another.

First, we are enlightened as to the radical nature of our new birth, which not only cleansed us but created in us a heart that responds to God, making love possible.

Second, we are encouraged to ask ourselves whether we are feeding daily on God's Word so as to cultivate this new life. We will not receive nourishment from other sources, so we must not neglect the Scriptures.

Third, in light of these first two, we need to be rebuked if our love is hypocritical, shallow or inconsistent. If we find ourselves not loving, the issue no longer is that we can't love, but that we choose not to.

When David, our young friend in Frankfurt airport, sang the words, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together as one," I had no idea of the impact this prayer would have on my life. This psalm became the theme for our trip to Eastern Europe. There we met a people whose love was so pure and burned so bright it was like a holy fire that consumed everything it could not love. It was impossible to experience this love and remain unchanged. We all came back with our hearts enlarged and our souls purified with love for Jesus Christ.

Though I love to travel and to see the Spirit of God move across the four winds, I must also say that my greatest joy is being right here in Silicon Valley, walking with a group of men who are learning to fervently love one another. I could tell you their names, but they are an insignificant group. What is thrilling to me, however, is that they have all learned the great truth that as men we are mud, we are all flesh, we are all weak. But knowing this creates an atmosphere of trust among us. We do not have to hide anything. There are no secrets in this group. All of these men look beyond the flesh and see the incorruptible seed of a new nature, and divine gifts. Therefore when they speak to one another, they encourage each other with honor, dignity and loyalty, without competition or pride. This is my greatest joy in life. I can sing, with David,

**Behold, how good and pleasant it is
For brothers to dwell together as one.**

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