

## Distinctive Family

<sup>22</sup> 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, <sup>23</sup> having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, <sup>24</sup> 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, <sup>25</sup> But the word of the LORD endures forever.”* Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:22–25)

Tertullian was a Christian who lived around A.D. 200. He wrote a number of books which are still with us today. In one of those books, he begins to describe what makes Christians different from the rest of Roman society. He gives the distinguishing marks of Christians, the peculiarities. After describing briefly how they worship, and how they administer themselves, he says this:

“But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. ‘See,’ they say, ‘how they love one another, ....how they are ready even to die for one another.’” Here was a watching world looking on, and the observation they made was “Behold how they love each other.” Christian love is unique, distinctive, unusual.

This kind of love becomes particularly vital when Christians suffer. When Christians face rejection, hostility, and persecution from the world, they need a refuge, a solace, a home they return to. That home is the church, the family of God. The church is supposed to be where Christian pilgrims are refreshed, fed, healed, and loved. No one is able to face suffering alone, and Christians cannot survive all the opposition, troubles, and trials they will face in the world without the body of Christ.

Any group in history that has faced persecution, opposition, targeted oppression has only survived because its members galvanised each other, strengthened one another. That was true of POWs in the Japanese camps. It was true of Jewish people in the death camps. It was true of the persecuted church in ancient Rome, during medieval Catholicism, and continues today in countries like Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and many other countries where the majority religion opposes biblical Christianity.

In the Soviet Union, China, and Eastern Europe, believers risked imprisonment to smuggle Bibles, support prisoners’ families, and worship in secret. When Romanian pastor Richard Wurmbrand was imprisoned, Christians shared scarce bread and whispered Scripture to one another in cells. “We had nothing — but we had love, and that was enough.” (Tortured for Christ)

But when you're suffering, you can't survive on mere sentiment, on niceness, on sweet wishes. If you're facing arrest, torture, loss of your home, loss of job, or even the trials of disease, calamity, tragedy, you don't mere well-wishers.

<sup>16</sup> By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren. <sup>17</sup> But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? <sup>18</sup> My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:16–18)

Or as James puts it, “<sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what *does it* profit? (James 2:15–16)

So in this book on suffering, more than once Peter exhorts believers to be distinctive and different in how we treat one another. The love between Christians is vital to face and endure suffering. But

it is a distinctive and different love, the love of a pilgrim people with new hearts, new dispositions.

Not only will this love be consoling and comforting to each other, it often serves as one of the greatest evidences for the Christian faith. You can give people reasons galore as to why they should believe the Christian gospel, but they will often remain unmoved. But let them see authentic, original, real Christian love, and their objections melt. “Behold, how they love one another”, they say. It both strengthens the Christian, and witnesses to the non-Christian.

Peter here gives us the command to love one another. And he surrounds that command with reasons why we love, and the way in which we should love. And in just four short verses, we see a picture emerge of an incredibly rare and beautiful thing: real Christian love. Here are three distinctives of a distinctive Christian love.

## **I. We Must Love One Another With Purity**

<sup>2</sup> 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,

Those three words in verse 22, purified, sincere, and pure all communicate that Christian love is pure. Pure from what? Pure from the selfishness and sin that pollutes and dilutes true love. Pure from the phoniness and fakery and hypocrisy that so often ruin and mar relationships.

The word translated *sincere* in verse 22 means “without pretence”. Paul uses the same word in Romans 12, where the command is simply: <sup>9</sup> *Let love be without hypocrisy.* (Romans 12:9) In the Greek, it literally means “without play-acting”

There is a real difference between loving people and trying to appear as if you are loving people. There is loving people and then there is wanting to be thought of as really loving. There is loving people and then there is putting your charity on display, as Jesus said some people blow a trumpet when they give, so as to be known as benevolent.

There are people who give, and people who film themselves as they give so that people will like a subscribe. There are people who really care, and people who have all kinds of sweet and syrupy verbal niceties but absolutely nothing nourishing in the way of real love.

As Christians purified and seeking purity, we must seek the experience of love, not the appearance of love. Love is not a show. It is real and generated by the Holy Spirit in your heart as you obey Him. Real love costs.

Now it certainly isn't wrong to want the person you're loving to know and feel that you do. But impure love is when you really do not care for the spiritual and personal wellbeing of this person; you only care about your image. Impure love is entirely self-focused, and so it is not love at all.

Peter takes this idea further at the end of verse 22. He says we must love one another fervently with a pure heart. Here the idea of purity means free of sin. Sin ruins love. Love is always corrupted by selfish desires.

That's why when Paul gives us his description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, notice how many of descriptions are negative – what love does not do. <sup>4</sup> Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; <sup>5</sup> does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; <sup>6</sup> does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; <sup>7</sup> bears all

things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4–7)

My love is weakened and polluted by boasting, pride, rudeness, self-seeking and self-centredness, irritableness, suspiciousness and negativity. No impure motives as to why we love each other. Real love is simple, childlike, unadorned desire to see the good of another. I seek your blessing, your shalom, your wellness in Christ, for no other reason that it is to God's glory, for your good, and for my joy.

Now I have to warn you, giving and receiving this kind of love can be a bit of shock to the system, if what you're used to is flattery, game-playing, office politics, family politics. If the relationships in your life have been people wearing masks, manipulating each other, faking friendliness, using passive-aggressive little digs, sweeping matters under the carpet, then real Christian love can be quite bracing, like a cold plunge, like a blast of icy fresh air.

All of that impurity is out. Now you mean what you say and say what you mean. Now you speak the truth in love. Now you give and receive correction. Now you work to solve conflicts biblically, and you forgive. Now you are really concerned with, what is best for my brother or sister, not “What will make my brother or sister think best of me?”

Note how this pure love takes place. Peter says Christians have purified our souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit. This may be pointing to original conversion, but more likely points to our ongoing sanctification, our spiritual growth. As we grow as Christians, we are putting off old habits and practices, doing those less, and replacing them with Christlike habits. This is obedience to the truth, and it is done through the power of the Holy Spirit. Learning to love each other purely is an ongoing work of sanctification.

A love that will strengthen you in suffering, and witness to the world is a pure love.

## **II. We Must Love One Another With Potency**

<sup>22</sup> 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,

Love one another fervently. The only other time this word is used in the New Testament is to describe the praying of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. <sup>44</sup> And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Luke 22:44)

The idea is one of intense effort. The love we are to have for one another is to be vigorous, strong, costly, strenuous. When we love this way, there is warmth, heartiness, tenderness, longing sympathy. Love with fervency, with eagerness.

Now first, why would the Spirit of God command this of us? Why command the intensity of our love? The answer is, because it is easy to become lazy in our affections. Our love suffers from entropy, and in our fallenness, we can become weak, half-hearted, insipid, tentative, passive in our love. We can become comfortably theoretical about how much we love, but not very practical. We can substitute loving the idea of loving with actually loving. Put simply, we grow tired, weary, and are prone to become weary in well-doing.

In fact, coldness of heart, hardness of heart is what the human heart returns to without grace. Without much grace, the heart closes to others, retreats, becomes cold, indifferent, self-centred, uncaring, cold, lazy.

And so the Word of God exhorts us to fan into flame affections that are flagging, losing zeal. Stir up the affections. <sup>11</sup> not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; (Romans 12:11)

This is a direct call to sense the temperature and diligence of our love and address any coldness.

But how are we to do this? Our feelings are not like a dial on the oven that we can just turn up the intensity. I can't cheerlead myself into feeling more love for my brethren at church.

But there is something that is under your control. First, you can choose to pray for others. Nothing enlarges your heart for others than to diligently and frequently pray for them: for their growth in Christlikeness, for their joy in God.

Second, you can move towards them in love. The actual Greek word literally means “stretching out”. Augustine once defined love as going out of yourself toward another.

You can act with diligence and effort when it comes to serving others. When it comes to meeting needs, encouraging the discouraged, helping, guiding, you can obey the Spirit of God and move towards the needs of others with diligence and zeal, or you can draw back in passivity. You can tell yourself you are too tired and too busy and withdraw from blessing and serving and showing hospitality and listening and sharing and giving, or you can go out of yourself and towards your brethren with diligence. Do that with diligence, with effort, with vigour, and you will soon find that your affections follow.

You can't always get the fervent feeling directly, but you can provide the atmosphere of zealous diligence in which those affections tend to heat up. Remember what Lewis said, “Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbour; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.”

Consider how the early church acted with potency, with passion, with purpose. Aristides described how the early Christians diligently loved each other.

“and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food.”

Sometimes you need to ask it this way. “What act of very obvious love and service can I do for my brethren? What will unmistakably be an act of service?” You don't have to be a Pharisee trumpeting his good works to make your love and service clear, unambiguously kind, unmistakably an act of zealous, diligent, sacrificial love. That's the path to fervent love.

### **III. We Must Love One Another With Permanent Loyalty**

<sup>3</sup> having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and

abides forever, <sup>24</sup> 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, <sup>25</sup> But the word of the LORD endures forever."* Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you.

You might remember Peter contrasted being redeemed with corruptible things like silver gold as opposed to the precious blood of Christ. Here again, he contrasts temporal, fading, passing things with imperishable, permanent, unfading things.

In specific, we were born again, new life was planted in us, took root and sprouted. And the mechanism that planted this new life in us was not some fad, some passing fashion, something trending on the Internet right now, something that's "in" right now. No, the mechanism and the very kind of seed itself planted in us is the living Word of God.

Now Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians that God spoke the world into being by saying, "Let there be light", and tells us that God spoke a similar miracle into our hearts. <sup>46</sup> For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6)

In other words, at some point, when the Gospel was preached to us, God spoke into a believer's heart, "Let the light of Jesus Christ shine" "Let the beauty of my Son appear to you". Now that kind of eternal, undying, unfading Word was how you were born again.

The word of God has the same lifespan as the God who spoke the Word. What God has said stands with finality, and its effects continue on indefinitely.

Peter quotes Isaiah 40:6-8: *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, <sup>25</sup> But the word of the LORD endures forever.*

In the Middle East, certain flowers, like the crocus flower can bloom in a day and be withered by the sun in the same day, an amazing picture of beauty that fades, transient, fleeting glory. Our bodily lives are as temporary as fading plant life, our human glory is a passing and forgettable as the beauty of withering flowers. But God's Word stands like a granite monument among all this fading foliage.

Now how does this relate to loving one another? If we've been made alive by this permanent enduring Word, then we belong to the same family by this enduring Word. So in the same way that our salvation is permanent and enduring, so is our love for others born of God. It's born of God. "And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. (Rom 5:5)

Spurgeon: "The love which Christ commands his followers to have towards one another is not the ordinary love of man to man as such, but the love of the new-born man to the new-born man. Let us, who love the Lord, love each other fervently in that sense. This is a love which arises out of a totally new union. A man, who is a Christian, belongs to a very special family."

And the love among those born of an enduring permanent Word, is an enduring, permanent love.

One of the most painful things about weak and worldly love is how fickle it is. Fair-weather friends is the name we give to people who love only when things are great, when it is easy, and enjoyable, and beneficial, and popular to love this person. But watch how quickly the world will turn on you, spurn you, cancel you, wash their hands of you if you become a liability to their image.

This is why the divorce rate in developed countries is 45%, with most of those marriages ending in the first eight years. This is why homes are filled with heartbreak and shattered relationships between parents and children, because any love not born of the enduring Word of God simply cannot survive the trials of life. The pain and problems and suffering of a fallen world does to mere human love what the Middle Eastern sun did to the crocus flower. It withers it.

But Christian love is enduring when our brothers and sisters are difficult and annoying. It endures when they go through seasons of spiritual regression and worldliness. It endures when they make foolish decisions with evil consequences. It endures when they lose their worldly wealth. It endures when they lapse into seasons of discouragement and depression. It endures when sickness renders them weak, and needy and unattractive.

That's why Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 contains all those endurance words: "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13:7-8).

In Pilgrim's Progress, Pilgrim would never have made it through the Slough of Despond, or come through Vanity Fair, or come out of Doubting Castle, or crossed the River of Death without his companions, Faithful and Hopeful. Their Christian love was the reason Pilgrim made it through the trials and suffering of his journey.

So you cannot control what love you're receiving, but you can control the love you're giving others. Is it pure – pure of all fakery and insincerity? Pure of selfishness? Is it potent? Is it zealous and vigorous enough to be noticeable, to cost, to cause you to break out in something of a sweat? Is it permanent? Does it have the same enduring quality of your God-given faith, your God-given salvation, persevering to the end?

We sing these words in our hymnal:

Grant, Lord, that with your direction,  
"Love each other," we comply,  
Aiming with unfeigned affection  
Your love to exemplify;  
Let our mutual love be glowing,  
Thus will others plainly view,  
How we, as on one stem growing,  
Living branches are in you.