

The Church is a Family

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[0 : 0 0] The reading today is from 1 Peter chapter 1 verses 13 through to chapter 2 verse 3. Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace that is to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do, for it is written, be holy because I am holy.

Since you call on a father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God who raised him from the dead and glorified him and so your faith and hope are in God.

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable through the living and enduring word of God. For all people are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever. And this is the word that was preached to you. Therefore rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Thanks Rosie for reading. If we've not met before, I'm Martin Ayers, the senior pastor here. We're going to be in that passage. We're going to take a shorter section of that, but we had a wider bit read so that we grab what Peter's saying there. Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word.

Let's pray together. Like newborn babies crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of your word and we pray that we will hear your voice clearly now. Would you help us to see Jesus and would you help us to receive your word as spiritual food that we might grow up in our salvation. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

[3 : 1 5] Amen. Well, we're living in a loneliness epidemic. People have talked about that because of COVID, COVID. But actually the loneliness epidemic started long before that. And there's this new book out, The Lonely Century by Lorena Hertz, where she starts with the story of being out with a friend, the excitement of waiting for her friend to arrive and the fun they're going to have shopping.

And then she explains that her friend is hired and she's part of the growing industry that's there where you can hire a friend if you don't have any friends to spend time with you, with their charm, and you can pretend it's all real for people who are too busy and too shy to make real friends.

It was three years ago in 2018 that the government appointed its first Minister for Loneliness, saying that tackling loneliness is one of the biggest public health challenges of our time.

One of the reasons we're lonely is because of where we live. With more and more people living alone in cities, we're often crammed in and surrounded by people we know, but rootless. So we lack a sense of having been in somewhere a while and other people knowing us and who we are and where we're from.

Another reason for our loneliness is technology, because we've all got a screen to access and social media is literally designed to steal our attention away from the people in front of us and onto whatever news is going on. So we have perhaps lots of social media friends, but no real time for any meaningful deep connection with people around us. Another reason people are lonely is the breakdown in family. So on current trends, half of the children born today will not be living with both parents by the time they're 16 years old. And of those children today who live in a home without their dad, two-thirds of those children hear from their dads by email or phone less than once a week. What that all means is people around us are longing for meaningful connection, for real friendship, and even for family. And the Lord speaks into that need as he calls his people to be not just his new community, but a whole new kind of community, the church. Now we're in a little series looking at what is the church, and we've pitched this through August because I think we have a kind of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to think about what church is. For lots of us, maybe we're people who had been going along to church before the pandemic, but had forgotten why.

[6 : 02] We sort of go to church because it's second nature, or we go because we really feel we should, or we go to see friends, or there's something we got out of church. But now we've got to a position where all that got thrown up in the air by the restrictions and lockdown, and maybe some of the things we went to church for weren't allowed. And as we're able to sort of draw back together again with some of those restrictions easing, it's a chance to think, but what on earth is church?

And do I really need it? What does God say about church? Well, last week we heard that church is a body. It's a body in the sense that it has many different parts, the different gifts that the Spirit has given to each one of us, and we're called to serve together as the body. For the next three Sundays, we're going to be in this letter that Peter wrote to early Christians who were scattered because they'd been persecuted, and they were around what's now modern-day Turkey.

And he teaches them with three different images of what it means to be the church. And today, it's that church is a family. It's a family called to love each other. So if you have a look at verse 22 again, he says this, verse 22, Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply from the heart. The family of God loving each other.

This picture of a family comes again and again in God's Word. It's why I usually try not to say church without saying church family, so that we're clear on that image. You might think of Jesus at the end of Mark 3. His ministry is kicking off. People are with him. Crowd's following him. And he's teaching a group of people. And his mother and brothers come to find him. And the message is brought into him that his mother and brothers are outside. And Jesus, Mark tells us, Jesus looks around at the people sitting in a circle around him, trusting him, listening to his teaching. And he says, here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.

He redefines family around himself. Now Peter writes this letter to churches under fire. He says in chapter 4, dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery trial you're going through. They've been scattered, they were suffering, but he calls them to build their lives together on the new identity that God has given them. That they're a family with great hope. So what do we learn about church as a family from 1 Peter? Three simple things this morning. It's a family that's built on a miracle.

[8 : 48] It's a family that strives to love. And we're a family that craves to grow up. So first, a family that's built on a miracle. Notice how just after Peter gives his command to love each other, he tells them about their new identity. He points them back to it again. So halfway through verse 22, love one another deeply from the heart. Then verse 23, 4, you have been born again.

Not of perishable seed, but of imperishable through the living and enduring word of God. And then he has this quote from the prophet Isaiah, because it's a promise that God gave through Isaiah, that one day God will deliver his people and he will reign forever. And that promise, they were still waiting for its fulfillment at the time Peter's writing. And we're still waiting for it today. But it's sure to come to pass. Verse 24, all people are like grass. All their glory is like the flowers of the field.

The grass withers and the flowers fall. But the word of the Lord endures forever. And this is the word that was preached to you. In other words, our new birth, thanks to the hope we have from God's word, it does stand and it will stand forever. It endures. God gives us new birth into a new family when we come to trust in the Lord Jesus. And this new birth is something life-changing for us.

Peter sees the Christian life as one looking to the future. And in chapter one, he talks about how, he says, we've praised God because he's given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you. So he's saying that because we look back at Jesus and that he rose again from the dead, we can have confidence in our future hope that there's an inheritance waiting for us.

And even though we live as strangers in the world today, even though we'll never truly feel at home in this world, together we're waiting for that inheritance when Jesus is revealed.

[11 : 04] Now, just as when we're born, we're born into a physical family that we don't choose and everything changes. You know, as we come out of the birth canal, everything changes. And we have this new family.

When we're born again spiritually, we get a new spiritual family. So in verse 17, he talks about how we can call on a father in heaven. In verse 22, we don't see it in our translation, but when he talks about having sincere love for each other, it's literally, you have brotherly love, or we might say today, brotherly and sisterly love. It's the word Philadelphia, the love for your brothers that they have within the church. In other words, we're a family. I don't know what you think about this family picture. For some of us, family is a painful image. It evokes difficult memories.

But however disappointing or troubling our own experience might have been of family, what God calls us to here, redeems the whole idea of family. Family was his good idea, his good design.

And he calls us into a family that's redeemed to have him as our father. And he's the perfect father. He's always there and dependable. He's constant and reliable. He's giving and generous and loving.

And God calls us to see our fellow Christians as brothers and sisters on a journey with us in this family to become more like Christ, our great brother. A new identity. So that, just speaking to give the example of what that's like for me, I'm a white British male Christian in my 40s. And I could meet a woman of color from Malawi in her 60s with four children and eight grandchildren and spend time with her and a teenage boy from Tel Aviv who's got a Jewish background and has come to faith in Jesus.

[13 : 11] And the three of us will have more in common with each other than I would have with another bloke from Middlesbrough who lives in Glasgow who's not a Christian. Because I'm family with them. What Christ has given me and them binds us together in a tremendous way. And that birth, that new birth, it doesn't just change our status before God, though it does that. It also changes us on the inside as the Spirit comes into our lives. So look at what Peter says there in verse 22. He doesn't just say love each other.

He says, now that you've purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply. So now that you've become a Christian, you've put your trust in the truth about Jesus, you have sincere love for each other. It's already happened.

So, an illustration of this that might stick in your mind. Last week, remember, for those of you here, we're all making t-shirts that say, I'm God's gift to this church. This week, when you write your name, you've got some letters you can put after your name. B-A and M-A. The B-A stands for born again.

And the M-A for marvelously altered. These are the two gifts that the Holy Spirit gives you when he comes into your life and does his saving work. Born again, to be justified, given living hope by God.

Marvelously altered, changed, given a love for God and other people that you didn't have before. Now, of course, we're not perfect. We're not the people we should be. We're not the people we will be.

[14 : 56] But there's something different as a Christian. There's a change in the way that you look at Christian brothers and sisters. So that when God calls us to love each other, he's not saying, obey me to get to heaven. He's saying, be who you are. Be who I've made you to be now, in the strength of the Spirit I've given you. But we don't just, therefore, let go and let God.

Our second point is that we're a family that strives to love. A family that strives to love. And we see that in that command, that key verse, verse 22. Let me read it for us again.

Now that you've purified yourselves by obeying the truth, so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply from the heart. It's as though Peter says, God has given you a muscle, but you need now to exercise it, to grow it in strength. You already love, but now you have to stretch yourself in love, to really love your brothers and sisters in Christ. Love one another deeply from the heart. I remember one of the first things that really bawled me over about a living church. When I was 21, and I went to a church, and I met this guy, and I was chatting to him on the edge of church, and he couldn't see very well. And then he told me that a guy in, he didn't have any money, and he told me that a guy in the church had just recently told him that he was going to pay for him to have the eye surgery he needed to see well again. And it just completely bawled me over, completely transformed what I thought of this community. I could imagine someone doing that for their brother or sister. It never occurred to me that relationships in a church would be like that, that someone would see a need, and would sacrificially give their money to help someone out. I think of people in our church who have committed to regularly phoning other members of our church family who live on their own during COVID times, just to be a friendly phone call. A guy who went round to someone's home to set up the technology for them so that they could watch church online when we had to stop meeting physically. The guy didn't have broadband, he didn't have a screen, and someone from the church just went round and set it all up for them. Think of a woman in our church who's, I think this has happened several times, I was thinking of a particular woman whose growth group was meeting on Zoom, and so she went round one day, she baked and went round and just dropped off tray bake at the homes, at the doorsteps of everyone in the growth group, so that they could start their Zoom call all eating the same food, like they would have done if they'd been together physically. The families who've come back together to 9.30 church and spend hours in the park together. The first Sunday we were able to meet again last summer, there was a group from the church standing under a tree in the park for hours in the pouring rain, just so pleased to be together again. I remember being ill a few years ago before we came to Glasgow,

I was having fits, and our second child was still a baby, and a lady just came to the door and said, I've just brought you fish pie, I thought you might need some food, I just brought round a meal, unannounced. I think of a single friend who has the back door keys to the family of, one of the families in the church, because that family want their single friend to know you can come round any time, we're a family. There's the people who cook meals for those in our church when they just had a baby, or when they're unwell, and the meal train, and Tricia coordinating that. A guy in our church, I can think of who I know is very happy in his own company, be very happy just to spend time on his own, but if he's got a Friday evening, and there's nothing in the diary, he actively looks through the directory for the people he thinks would be unhappily alone, and offers to spend the evening with them. Think of the single people in our church who offer to babysit for parents, so that they can get out and have some time together when they've got young children, or the people who babysit for couples, so that they can go and do a ministry together, leading a group somewhere, or being involved in a ministry, because their children are cared for at home.

And if we're looking for ways to get started in stretching ourselves, in loving other people in our church family, a great place to start is just by joining a growth group, or a roots group, so that you're thrown into those relationships of a small group community. And I can think of guys in our church who encourage others just because there are people in their groups who know, if I manage to get to my growth group this week, I know that they'll be there. They're always there.

[20 : 17] It's a love for each other that's outward looking and not cliquy, so there's a lot to be said in a church family for knowing who the three people are, two or three people who are closer friends, who you have a special depth of friendship with for prayer, support, accountability, encouragement.

But when we meet together, our friendship groups shouldn't be a closed circle. We should be on the lookout to welcome newcomers, looking at who's on the outside and trying to work out how to invite them in. And it's worth thinking through when those times are right. So sometimes Sunday after church is not a great time to just make a beeline for the one or two people you know really well. Because it's the time to think, who's new? Who's standing with a coffee from next week? Looking at the notice board because they're not really interested in the notices. They've just got no one to speak to. And thinking through how we turn ourselves outward facing. I think that as a church family, St. Silas has had a great history of this over the years, being known as a welcoming church. And from next week, what we want to do is get back as we burst out again and we can grow the teams to having teams of welcomeers. So that some of us would think, hopefully we all think welcome, but some of us think that's a particular ministry for me at the church. That I look out for newcomers and want to see them shown a welcome that honors the Lord. And the discipline of striving to stretch ourselves in love includes being ruthless about cutting out from our lives the things that spoil relationships. So you see Peter turn to that next in chapter 2 verse 1. Just have a look.

He says, therefore rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. So getting rid of malice, of speaking about someone in a way that is harmful to them.

Getting rid of hypocrisy, of putting on a face that implies we are more godly than we are. Of envy, feeling resentful about somebody else. That they have what we wish we had.

Or they're given people speak about them in a way that we wish they spoke about us instead. And slander, get rid of slander, sharing criticism and gossip. It's strong language, isn't it? Get rid of those things. Just rid yourself of them. Be disgusted by them as instead you turn to strive to love others.

[23 : 07] So we need each other if we are to grow to be mature. We will be spiritual babies without one another. The word one another, the word for one another is used a hundred times in the New Testament.

Bear with one another, forgive one another, greet one another, accept one another, speak the truth in love to one another. We can't do those things at home watching online. That's church on life support. I was thinking last week about a guy I heard talking about, reflecting on how churches have fared in lockdown when everything had to go online. And he was describing churches that had done better than others in retaining people. And he was saying, because of the kind of church he was in and their model of church, he was saying, for us, church is a bit more of a performance. And those churches had really struggled to retain people online because people come for the experience of the performance. And that didn't translate well to watching it on a screen. And he was saying, other churches have retained people really well because for them, church is more like a documentary.

They come to church to get informed. And you could translate that better to on a screen. They can still get informed when it's online. But that's a really disappointing set of alternatives of models of church to be presented with because church is not a performance. And it's not a documentary.

Church is a community. We're a family. That's what God calls us to be. To stretch ourselves in loving each other. So that's our second point. We've heard that our family is built on a miraculous start.

And we're a family that strives to love each other. And Peter goes on finally to say, we're a family that craves to grow up. Have a look with me at verse 2 of chapter 2 at the end there.

[25 : 09] He says, like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. So we're born again into a new family.

We're brothers and sisters in the family. We're also babies in the family. It's a very humbling picture, isn't it? It might bring us down a peg or two to think that in the Christian life, Peter wants us to see that we've always got room to grow. No matter how long you've been a Christian, think of yourself as a baby. And like a baby craves milk, crave the spiritual milk that will help you grow. We've got several babies in our church family at the moment, haven't we? And we can't hear any right now. But I mean, babies do make an astonishing noise when they're hungry. It is a remarkable thing to behold. It's like their whole body is involved in driving this noise out of themselves as they crave the milk they know they need. It's a very striking picture of the Christian life, that we would be craving the spiritual milk to grow up in our salvation. I wonder what that would look like for you to do that.

Of course, central to it is growing in the Word of God. We've heard already from Peter that it's that Word that was planted in us that is imperishable seed that stands forever. And it's that Word that we're able to build ourselves up on and grow in. And I think Peter wants us to see that it's not just about reading the Bible in itself. It's about reading the Bible in obedient trust, being people who read the Word and live the Word. Because it comes just after that, chapter 2, verse 1. So it's as we rid ourselves of those things that would hold us back from growing, we turn and we pursue the righteous living by God's Word that will help us grow up in our salvation. So it's a fresh start for lots of us.

Some of you have recently started new jobs. Others are maybe thinking you've just got back from summer holidays. Schools are starting again. Could you see yourself in this next season of life again as a spiritual baby and crave the Word of God? Make a fresh start with the Word on Sundays in the way that we come to church and our attitude towards it day by day with our Bible at home. And as we hear God's Word on church, my hope is that it will draw us back together in renewed commitment, but not to a performance or a documentary, to a family, to one another. A place where we come together with diverse people who are all now adopted by God miraculously and have living hope. And as we stretch ourselves in loving each other, just think how attractive that will be to the people around us who are lonely. This is the lonely century and people long for genuine, sincere, meaningful connection. What an opportunity for us as the church, as we rebuild, so that people can maybe spend time with you, with your Christian friends, and go away thinking, you know, there was something about them that was different, and it's what I've been looking for. Let's pray together. Let's pray.

Gracious God, we thank you that you are our Father. We acknowledge that we have not been the loving people we should be. And by your Spirit, we pray that you will transform us. We thank you that your Spirit has set us apart. And as we put our faith in Christ, you count us as clean and forgiven.

[29 : 24] Would you transform us that we would be a community that love one another deeply from the heart? And as that love builds each other up, would it also draw in many to know Christ? We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

We're going to sing again in response to God's Word. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.