

The Duty of Family Love (1 Pet 1.22-25)

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Pastor Ostella

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Introduction

Another year has come and gone since our last regular family meeting. In many ways, we are the same church that we were a year ago; in many ways, we are a different church. What makes us a different church? In asking this question, I am not thinking about our size, location, or outward things that some people use to judge “success.” I am thinking about our experiences as individuals and as a church over the last year. In other words, change has come to us all. Our circumstances in life (family, church, work, and every step in between) change continually, and that change changes us. The passing of time makes us aware of the fact that we are like the grass that withers and the flower that falls.

Changing winds and the frailty of our lives confront us. We hear of the deaths of famous people far away from us, and we experience the death of family members nearby. Consider the death of Mr. King: like grass that withers, he was once young and strong (a swimmer, a pilot, a saxophone player, a fixer of anything that could be taken apart), but he withered away to bare bones, like a flower, one petal after another fell until “his place knew him no more.”

In the midst of frail human existence, we may wisely ask, “What really counts?” What has substance? The answer that Peter gives may surprise us. Interestingly, in this context of the withering frailty of human existence, Peter connects two things: the imperishable word of God and the fundamental duty of family love.

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart,²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;²⁴ for “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls,²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever.” And this word is the good news that was preached to you (1 Pet 1.22-25).

At first, family love, God’s word, and preaching seem to stand together somewhat loosely, but the close tie will become evident as we take up the theme today of family love. Specifically, I want to discuss “The Duty of Family Love” by considering what it is and why it is (What is the duty of family love? Why is family love a duty?).

1A. What is the duty of family love?

The fact that love is a duty is clear from the main clause in verse 22b where the word love expresses an imperative: love, it is your duty to love. The family idea comes out at two places in the text. The love in view is in a family into which we have been born (v. 23, **you have been born again**). Furthermore, Peter calls it **brotherly love** (v. 22a). What, then, is our duty as brothers and sisters in Christ? A number of things in the passage describe this duty. It is to be sincere, mutual, earnest, pure, and radical. I want to comment on each of these things with emphasis on the last point of radicality.

1) Family love is to be sincere

That is, brotherly love should be unfeigned, without hypocrisy, without pretense, and without “play-acting.” If it is not sincere, then it is merely an outward show. It is superficial and has no depth. In other words, it is not genuine. It is not from the heart. People express insincere love when they are looking for their own advantage, for what they can get out of the situation.

They are not looking at what they can give by doing good to those of the household of faith (Gal 6.10).

2) Family love is mutual

We have studied this point before, but it is so vital that it bears repeating. The duty that we have as Christians is the one anothering kind: **love one another earnestly from a pure heart**. We are to seriously consider how we can fulfill this imperative in a one-anothering way. To make the point stick, it may help us here to think of what happens when Christians get tired as they travel the road to the celestial city (drawing from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*). A weary-laden Christian may slow down to a practical standstill or slip off the path onto by-path meadow. Either way, trouble is certain to overtake him.

However, that is when those who are strong come alongside, one takes the left arm and the other takes the right arm, and speaking kindly, they encourage the weary laden to pick up his feet. Notably, there are two sides in forward progress: the strong must speak and the weak must listen, the strong must extend help and the weak must receive it. There is third side in the bigger picture; we may call it "the next time scenario." That is, the next time there is someone in need, things will be in the reverse and a strong one will be weak from all his work; he will become weary and fall behind. That is when the weak, now strong, come to his aid. This is the mutuality of family love. It involves a one-anothering in which we stir each other up to love and good works. The writer of Hebrews says that we should make a study of how to do this: **And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works** (10.24). This "and" continues the exhortation that began with "brothers" (v. 19) and continues with the reference to the great high priest that we have over the *house* of God (v. 21).

In summary, involves giving help and receiving help, and it involves sometimes being the one giving and other times being the one receiving. It is no shame to receive; it is necessary, even if it is better to give. Pride may get in the way of receiving, but it is part of the mutuality!

3) Family love is earnest

This simply means that it takes work and we put it forth. We may tend toward slothfulness in many ways, but here the concern is with slothfulness regarding the work of love. It means that you push yourself beyond a negative inertia to get outside of yourself. You push yourself to think about others in the family of God, to pray for them, and to engage them, and to share your life with them as you seek their good.

4) Family love is pure

What does Peter mean when he speaks of purity in this context? It carries the idea of clean and it refers to the heart: **love one another earnestly from a pure heart** (1 Pet 1.22a). A good way to think of this part of the duty of family love is to think of it as love that arises from a heart that God is cleaning up day by day. Thus, the things we do for others come from a person who is growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. By prayerful study of the Scriptures, we become more and more like Christ (2 Cor 3.18; 4.4). Then our actions show more self-denial, express love for the family, and give glory to God.

5) Family love is radical

When I use the term radical here I have the first part of 1 Peter 1.22 in mind: **Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love**. There is some question regarding how we are to understand the last phrase, "for a sincere brotherly love." Is it the result of our sanctification (or growth in grace)? Alternatively, is it the goal of our coming to faith in Christ? Note some things that argue for the idea of goal here. a) The immediately preceding context explains the origin of our status as believers. From 1.20, we know that we are believers through

Christ who was foreknown (loved with a special electing love) and made manifest in the last times (by the coming of the kingdom in the history of redemption) for our sakes (He had us in mind before the world began). Peter then describes that status that Christ brought about as our purification by our obedience to the truth (1.22). b) Obeying the truth is another way of speaking of faith at the beginning of the Christian life, as Paul teaches in Romans 6. In harmony with Paul, Peter speaks of obedience as the result of the new birth (**since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God, 1 Pet 1.23**).

Thus, the goal of our coming to the obedience of faith is in view in 1 Peter 1.22. Our purification brought God's eternal plan for us to realization (this is from the preceding context), and that obedience is explained by the new birth; it is the action of God that caused our obedience and set us apart as the children of God.

Now we can emphasize the radicality of family love in Christ. Peter is reminding us of a primary goal that is associated with our new birth and our initial commitment of obedience to the Lord Jesus. On one hand, we can say that when we came to faith in Christ we made a covenant to obey Him as our elder brother with God as our Father (cf. 1 Pet 1.3, 17). It is implicit in our baptismal covenant of repentance (cf. the tie of brotherly love, 1 Pet 3.8 with the pledge of obedience we make in baptism, 1 Pet 3.21, and the fact that baptism is into one body; remember that both baptism and communion are signs of our union in the family of God). In other words, when we come to Christ, we come to His family and when we commit ourselves to Him, we commit ourselves to the deep-rooted goal of brotherly love. This is radical. It goes back to the very beginning of our walk with Christ. On the other hand, because of the tie with the new birth, we have to say that family love is the goal that God has in mind when He brings us into His family. The purification is definitive or initial. He gives the new birth, makes us His children, cleanses us, and sets us apart from the world. His definitive work causes us to embrace Jesus offered to us in the gospel (cf. how the WSC defines effectual calling, QA 31).

Therefore, the family love that comes to us as an imperative is radical and deep-rooted. It is a fundamental goal of our salvation from its inception. Thus, we can talk about different goals of the Christian walk. Of course, the primary goal beyond all other goals is to glorify God. Nonetheless, we have to call family love a primary goal of our walk as Christians. Calvin has some instructive words for us about this love, which he calls "the chief thing." It is the chief end of man restored in the image of God and renewed by the new birth. Calvin calls family love the mark toward which we should aim in all of our endeavors. He says it is the key in a life "rightly formed" and he says that mutual love towards one another is what God would have us cultivate through life. It is what God especially requires in our life as the perfection of the faithful. Here we testify that we love God. Here God proves who they are that really love him (Commentary on 1 Peter 1.22).

2A. Why is family love our duty?

What grounds our duty as brothers and sisters in Christ?

Peter grounds this imperative in the new birth by the imperishable word of God. He says in effect, "Because you are born again, you ought to live a life worthy of God and that corresponds to your new birth."

Furthermore, he adds the significant point that God used His imperishable word to give us the new birth, and to make us family members one of another. **Since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;** ²⁴ for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, ²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you (1 Pet 1.22-25).

The truth, the imperishable seed, the living and abiding word, the good news preached are ways that Peter describes how we entered the Christian family.

Furthermore, he puts the word that abides in sharp contrast to all flesh that is like grass that has a little glory like the beauty of a flower. All people are fallen in Adam and therefore all people are subject to dying and death. He states this to humble us when we look at ourselves. Then Peter tells us that the word of the Lord remains forever, and that word gave us the new birth for the goal of family love.

How does this ground our duty of brotherly love? Well, let us try to think it through. The eternal and abiding word gives us eternal life in our desperate need. God does this by His word and that word is good news or the gospel. Thus, if God did this for us by His word and if the goal of doing this for us is mutual one anothering family love, then how can we think of making anything else the center of our living on earth, then that to which the living word points us?

Gratitude for the word must take us to love for the family.

Love to God for the new birth must take us in thought to His goal that we show family love and thereby prove our love for Him.

As we take up the word of God in discipleship, we must always keep this primary goal in mind, namely, that God gave us the word for the goal of family love. Thus, the Lord bonds the good news inseparably with mutual one anothering love.

Conclusion

The life giving good news brought us into a new family. What the word gives us abides as it abides. The living eternal word gives eternal life.

1) Therefore, the appropriate response is to be what we are. We are the children of God and thereby brothers and sisters of one another. Do so, for one, in the context of preaching.

2) Therefore, seasoned by the love of Christ, and with our hearts filled with good news, we are to consider the family in Christ in a way that has a radicality and primacy, in a way that is radical and primary.

3) Therefore, we are to consider it an imperative of our existence on this earth that we cultivate sincere, mutual, earnest, pure, radical, brotherly, and gospel grounded family love.

May we fall down before the majesty of our Lord Jesus Christ and before the Great Shepherd of the sheep, our Great High Priest, and our Elder Brother. To Him be all glory both now in the church on earth and forevermore in the church in heaven. Amen.