

From I-Life to We-Life

Sermons from 1 Peter 1-2 Sermon 6

1 Peter 1:22-2:10

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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.²³ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For, “All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, ²⁵ but the word of the Lord endures forever.” And this is the word that was preached to you.

2 Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. ² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. ⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— ⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” ⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” ⁸ and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. ⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 1:22-2:10, ESV)

We prize independence and personal freedom, often above all else. Our iPhones, iPads, and iTunes rightly reflect our i-world and desire to live an i-life. In the i-world, the individual leverages their independence, not so much to serve the other, but to express the self—in any and every way the self so desires.

But strangely, perhaps even ironically, our love of independence sits awkwardly alongside our need for community. Our freedom from all restraints, at times, undermines our longing for lasting connection with others. It can even threaten our own sense of self. As long ago as 1953, sociologist Robert Nisbet, in his important book *The Quest for Community*, warned Americans, “The historical emphasis upon the individual has been at the expense of the associative and symbolic relationship that must in fact uphold the individual’s own sense of integrity.”

The individual disintegrates without community. The child needs her friends. Too much independence can lead to isolation. The free individual can become the lost individual. The retreat into self-discovery can lead to the dead-end of self-obsession.

We all need that web of relationships, that community that helps us know who we are, supports us during life's hardships, corrects us when we err, and saves us from the despair of loneliness. Into this tension between the individual and community comes the Gospel—the Good News that through Jesus Christ, God unites us with Himself but also with a new community. As we will see in our passage in 1 Peter today, 1:22–2:10, the Gospel not only recreates and reorients the individual, but it does so by placing him or her into a new community. In modern parlance, we might state the point of our passage:

God saves us from the dead-end of *i-life*, through the loving bonds of the Gospel's *we-life*.

1 Peter 1:22–2:10 is about the we-life of Christianity, a welcome antidote to the isolation and malformation of the i-life. This transference from i-life to we-life, how it works and what it looks like, can be further unpacked by drawing three observations from our passage. We'll need to note: first, that God Created us for community; second, that God's new community is deep and wide; and third, that God's new community makes the Gospel visible.

I. God Created Us for Community

Peter is moving into a focus on the communal aspect of his reader's new lives. They have been born again into a new relationship with God, but they have also been born again in order to love each other.

“Love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again” (1 Peter 1:22b-23a).

Notice then how dominant this theme of a community becomes:

- “You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5)
- “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Peter 2:9)
- “Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people” (1 Peter 2:10).

What is striking about this theme is the ease with which Peter moves into it. Without an explanation, he just asserts that a new relationship with God implies new relationships with others. Notice how this unfolds in the first verse of our passage. Peter writes, “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart” (1 Peter 1:22).

Peter is teaching that when you purify your soul by obeying God’s truth, it is for the purpose of brotherly love. While I think we all like this idea—knowing God leads to loving others—I want to suggest that at first glance, the connection between the two ideas is not so obvious.

So far in the letter, Peter has focused on what God has done for the individual Christian: *God has chosen her, saved her through the new birth, and given her a living hope and eternal inheritance.* In light of all of this, I might assume verse 22 to read something like: *“Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of God, earnestly love God from a pure heart.”*

But without explanation, Peter states that a new relationship with God leads to new relationships with others. If you purify your soul in God’s truth, your soul overflows in a new type of love for others. An important idea stands behind Peter’s words here that we must take note of.

God created us for community. God’s design is not an *i-life*, but a *we-life*.

This is so from the very beginning. Adam, the first man, freshly minted, stands before the unstained world, and His Maker says, “it is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2). And with the union of Adam and Eve, the first human community is created—the family.

As Scripture unfolds, yet another community emerges commanding even greater loyalty than the nuclear family, and that community is the people of God.

- Abraham is not commanded to go find himself; he is commanded to become a nation.
- Moses is not raised up for the sake of his personal freedom; he is raised up to free a people to once again be God’s people.
- The prophets call for more than individual spiritual renewal; they call a nation to come back to God.
- Jesus models true humanity not through self-obsession, but by calling a group of disciples around Him for whom He would die.

- Following Jesus resurrection and ascension, the new era of God’s work with man is marked not by person’s finding personal happiness, but by the birth of the church.
- And finally, the Bible’s vision of the future brings together the first community of Adam and Eve with this bigger community of God’s people, when in the final pages of the Bible the Church is presented to Jesus as His Bride (Revelation 21:2, 9).

To purify your soul in God’s truth, which Peter calls for in v. 22, is to submerge yourself in God’s communal design for life. One can only emerge from such saturation with an acute awareness that they are made for connection with others.

We live in a nation that worships the autonomous individual. But God created us for community. The entire Bible witnesses to this fact: **we are not ourselves by ourselves**. This means at least two things: Firstly, influenced as we all are by our culture, each of us is likely malnourished and malformed when it comes to the communal side of our existence. Secondly, when asking if or how God is working in our lives, we should pay closer attention to the relationships He is placing us in—for they may be the very means through which He moves.

Noting how central community is to God’s design for existence gives rise to a second question: *What is community like? How is it formed? How does God form community differently than we do on our own? What should we look for when looking for a good community?* These questions take us to our second observation from our passage: God’s community is deep and wide.

II. God’s Community Is Deep and Wide

Themes in the remainder of our passage focus on how God forms His new community, and how we work to maintain these communal bonds. For example, in verse 2:5 we read, “you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house.” We are not building ourselves into that house; we are being built up by God into that spiritual house. Back in verse 1:23, we read that a keyway we keep up this house that God is building, is by loving each other. “Love one another earnestly from a pure heart,” Peter writes. These verses beg questions about how community is built, and what it’s like once you’re inside it.

Deep and Wide

I think in today's world people value two things above all else when it comes to community. They want community to be deep and wide. By deep, I mean authentic and real, not shallow and fake. We want a community where we are deeply seen, deeply known, and deeply affirmed. By wide, I mean inclusive. We want our communities to be open to anyone and everyone.

This are good desires. *But how successful are we at building deep and wide community?*

Building the i-Life Community

Our passage likens the formation of a community to placing blocks together, one next to the other. *What type of building blocks do we work with in today's world when we build community?*

Modern man builds his community with stones shaped by the i-world. These building blocks prize the autonomous and free selves above all. These stones exist to shape themselves into whatever shape they so desire. But it's hard to fit self-shaping stones that constantly want freedom to reshape themselves very close together.

And when you combine expressive individualism (*I can be anything I want*) with inclusivity (*anyone can be in this community*), you may get a wide community, but it cannot be deep. Each individual expands, and like balloons expanding with air, move further and further apart to accommodate the other. The i-life lacks the qualities of self-denial and self-sacrifice necessary to form a deep community. Intimacy is sacrifice for individualism; love is replaced by tolerance.

A community formed around stones shaped by the i-world eventually undermines itself. If wide, it will be shallow. If deep, it will be narrow, where only a few who happen to agree on everything can remain close.

Building the We-Life Community

But God builds His community differently. His stones don't shape themselves. Rather, they are carefully formed by His own hands into their own unique likeness of His Son. And they are placed, not each according to his own agenda, but they are all oriented according to one great cornerstone, Jesus Christ. He says in v 2:6, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious" (1 Peter 2:6).

Returning to verses 22-23, we can see two aspects to how God builds the new community: **New Birth** and **New Love**.

The new love is only possible once the new birth happens, which Peter describes in vv. 22-23 “Love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of imperishable seed but of imperishable seed, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Peter 1:22b-23).

What does the new birth tell us about God’s new community? It means His building blocks have been made radically new. It means you are only part of this community if you have been utterly changed by the Gospel. If you’ve repented of your sin, come to Jesus Christ, and found new life in Him. And the image of new birth speaks to being brought into a new family, which is why Christians call each other *brothers and sisters*.

God’s new community is radically inclusive. God has acted to create new birth among Jews and Gentiles, Slaves and Freemen, Men and Women, young and old, rich and poor. As the portrait from heaven offered in Revelation attests, God’s new community is wide enough to include people from “every nation, from all trines and people and languages” (Revelation 7:9). The wideness of the community is a sign of the wideness of God’s love and rule. In the first century, this type of inclusion was unheard of. But the new community is not only wide. It is also deep. And this is seen if we notice a new type of love that is possible.

Notice the emphasis that Peter places on the new nature of the people of God. He compares a plant that is born from natural seed, which is therefore perishable and fading, with something that is born of supernatural seed and is therefore imperishable in nature. The point he is stressing is that the Christian’s new life draws from a new nature—the life of God. This new nature is a source of a new type of love. Notice again the logic of the verses: “love one another ... since you have been born again” (v.22b-23a). The new birth makes possible new love.¹

God’s New Family is deep in love, and wide in inclusivity.

Let me offer an image, or parable, to see how God’s forming of community is different than that formed by the i-world. Imagine there is a large building with a single doorway. Being inside that building represents being in community. There are a number of travelers standing outside the building, each holding several bags of luggage. The doorway is small, however, and none of the travelers can fit

through it standing upright, nor pass through it carrying all their bags—so it would seem, they can't easily enter. There are two options for getting them into the building. Option one, blow up the doorway to make it bigger. Make it so big that they can walk through standing tall and proud; and make it so wide they don't have to let go of a single piece of their baggage. Now, if their posture represents their sense of pride, and their baggage represents holding onto their own opinions and views, then this is an image for community built by *expressive individualism*. And inside the room, you know how large people who are rooted in their pride and opinions are; their baggage doesn't allow them to get close. And in order to really embrace, they'd have to put down their bags and lower their chins, which they will not do. Here is a community made by tolerance that celebrates the individual.

There is a second option, however, for getting them into the building: You can require them each to drop all their bags, kneel, and in a posture of humility, crawl into the room. Once inside, they are not free of their baggage and pride and have a much easier time embracing one another.

Because it is built by His own hands, God's new community is deep and wide. Let's move to a final observation: how God's New Community makes the Gospel visible.

III. God's New Community Makes the Gospel Visible

The young Yale graduate, Marina Keegan, who tragically died just weeks after graduation, wrote an essay for her college newspaper just prior to graduation that has become well known. She writes,

[College] is full of tiny circles we pull around ourselves. A cappella groups, sports teams, houses, societies, clubs. These groups make us feel loved and safe and part of something even on our loneliest nights...we won't have those next year. We won't live on the same block as all our friends. This scares me. More than finding the right job or city or spouse – I'm scared of losing this web we're in. This elusive, indefinable, opposite of loneliness.¹

Maria concluded, "We don't have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that's what I want in life."

People are terrified of being alone. And the modern world, replete with online, virtual friendships and sated by sex, is starved for real intimacy. Loneliness and insecurity are natural byproducts of a culture that forces us to obsess over curating our boutique individuality while requiring the people around us to make room for it. And this modern world, so keen on authenticity, is not a safe place for people to

be broken or vulnerable. Our online communities salivate at the opportunity to display the failings of others in high definition.

Into this individual and communal brokenness, the Church has a profound opportunity. For many of us, and for many others, it will be the love of the local church community that makes the Gospel felt; that makes the good news of Christianity visible.

By way of application and charge, I want to suggest three qualities of our community's love—all shaped by the Gospel—that make the Gospel uniquely visible.

1. Humility

First, we are a humble people who show a humble love. Our path into the Church community didn't begin with self-expression, but self-annihilation of our old selves; we were dead in our sins and trespasses. Our old self was crucified with Christ. In its envy and meanness, we put it off daily. We have been tutored, not to express ourselves, but to be conformed to the image of Jesus, to take up His cross and follow Him. Our community should be marked by a love that emanates out of humility.

2. Vulnerability

Second, we must display a love that makes it safe to be vulnerable. Our world is not a safe place to be broken. We are trained to be proud of who we are—but the truth is, most people are not proud of who they are. Most people don't even know who they really are. And most people have at least an inkling that deep down they are broken and need to be fixed.

3. Responsibility

Rather than over-focusing on our own needs being met, like Christ, we should lay down our lives and take responsibility for others.

The Church is a community of broken people, saved by the love of God, being fixed by the Spirit of God. We should be the safest place in the world to be vulnerable about your own brokenness. There is not true depth and intimacy in community without this. Let us not lead with our strengths, but with our weaknesses.

Near the end of this section, Peter writes:

“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” (1 Peter 2:9).

The quality of our community, the nature of our love for one another, will be the foundation of our witness to the excellencies of Him who called us out of the darkness of the i-world, into the glorious light of the we-world that is His New Community.

Endnotes

1. *Uniqueness of Christian Love*: Notice how Peter then stresses the uniqueness of this love: He says four things about this between verses 22-23: (1) The love that holds the community together is **familial**—“brotherly love” (v.22). (2) Second, it is **sincere** (v.22), meaning it is without hypocrisy. (3) Third, it is **earnest** (v.22), referring not so much to emotion, but devotion; it is a committed and constant love. (4) Fourth, it comes from a **pure heart** (v.23), meaning it is not mingled with other motives save the desire to see spiritual and physical goodness for the other.
2. Marina Keegan, “The Opposite of Loneliness: Essays and Stories,” (New York, NY: Scribner, 2014).