



A Foundational Truth

1 Peter 1:17-23

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Good morning, and again, Blessed Easter! We will continue to reiterate that Easter is *not* just a day. It is not *just* an empty tomb. Easter is a celebration of Jesus' resurrection through which God enacts divine justice.

In this season of Easter, we are using the First Epistle of Peter to look at how we might live as God's Easter people in a world that is continually changing. How do we cope with a society, a culture, and political environment that often works against God's divine justice?

Last week, we looked at the invitation of the author of the Epistle to claim that, through the resurrection, we have a living hope and eternal inheritance that offers salvation for our souls. It centered everything we do and believe as a people of Christ on the resurrection.

Following that foundational promise of our faith, the author then begins in verse 17 to name a number of imperatives, which specify how we are to live as a people who have this faith in the resurrected Christ.

Before we look at the first few imperatives named in our scripture for today, let's center these imperatives in a historical debate. Generally, we define the word "imperative" as something we should or must do. According to Merriam-Webster, an imperative can be defined as "an obligatory act or duty," "something *not* to be avoided or evaded," or something "necessary." It is universally agreed that the author's instructions are *imperatives*: pretty much everyone understands that they are expectations (things the apostle expected to exist in the life of the faithful). The debate then isn't whether these imperatives are required of the faithful, the debate stems around how these imperatives play a role in our discipleship.

Scholars, theologians, pastors, and church members alike have long debated: are these imperatives necessary for someone to *become* a Christian, or do these imperatives kick in *after* someone has committed to the faith? Are these imperatives a checklist that one must complete *before* they can be welcomed into the body of the faithful, or are they imperatives that must be worked on *after* becoming part of the body of Christ?

An extension of that debate asks: how do these imperatives relate to our living hope and inheritance of faith. There have been many in the history of Christianity who say these imperatives must be lived out for someone to receive the inheritance of their faith. We call this way of thinking "salvation by works." In this way, we receive our salvation *by doing the things* we are told to do. Conversely, others say that our inheritance of salvation is not earned by doing

works, but instead, we receive “salvation by faith.” In this mindset, it is faith – and faith alone – that offers salvation. In the “salvation by faith” camp, it is believed that these imperatives or “works” do not earn our salvation, but are instead the expected byproduct of how we will live as a people who have been ensured our salvation.

This is one of those theological areas where I think any one of a number of scriptures can be used in isolation to argue for either perspective. (Did you catch that? In isolation.) My read of the Biblical text (on the whole) is that there is no amount of good works we can do to earn our salvation. The inheritance of salvation that the Epistle speaks of is of God, from God, and exists only because of God’s work. In the “salvation by works” vs “salvation by faith” debate, John Wesley once wrote, we must first encounter the grace of God, and then, because we have encountered God’s grace, we will “pursue a holier life very actively.”ⁱ In Wesley’s thought, salvation is the work of God, and those who have encountered such grace will devote themselves to the works that define a holy life.

So, as we look at these imperatives, as we consider the things the author of First Peter believed we *would* be doing, let us remember that these are not things we do to earn God’s grace, to receive God’s salvation, or to be gifted a living hope. These are things the apostle believed would exist *because* of our faith; these would be true of our being *because* of God’s work for us; these imperatives define our lives *because* of a faith that had already been confirmed. Or, as Theologian Carl Holliday summarizes, “[the true test of the indwelling love of Christ is found in the change that takes place in a person and the new life they exhibit.]”ⁱⁱ

With those thoughts in mind, let us turn back to the text. Verse 18 reads, “You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors.” We should be reminded that the First Epistle of Peter is not written for a people who stem from historic Jewish thought. The author is speaking to a Gentile audience that did not grow up with Jewish customs. The worship practices of the Gentiles were marked by polytheism; their ancestors worshipped false gods (many of them), often taking place in the form of a empirical leader like Caesar and Pharaoh.

The first change that is expected comes in our understanding of who God is, and who we are because of who God is.

Unlike the false gods of their ancestors, the God of creation does not come and go with the seasons. It’s humorous how the author explains this, writing, “you were ransomed not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.”

I’m still friends with a number of high school classmates on Facebook. One of them collects silver and gold in the form of coins and bars. He posts with regularity anytime he gets a new silver or gold item. His financial security and personal well-being are tied up in his vast collection of silver and gold. If you were to ask him, he would speak to the lasting nature of

silver and gold. Such precious metals are not considered perishable in the financial markets. In fact, because they are so unperishable, they have a lasting quality of financial security.

And yet, even as lasting as gold and silver may be, the author indicates that compared to the blood of Christ – the ransom through which God has secured our living hope and inheritance of salvation – gold and silver are indeed perishable. As fine as they may be in the financial markets, they are still earthly materials, which pale in comparison to the eternal inheritance we have received from God through Christ.

The author is reframing the gentile relationship with the ways of their past human existence. Not only does our living hope and inheritance of salvation reframe our understanding of God – turning us from our ancestral ways of polytheistic worship, but it also reframes our understanding of what secures life in the here and now. Silver and gold are to be understood as perishable items, which cannot secure for us any inheritance. It is only through Christ, the one raised from the dead, that we turn to God – the singular God of Creation – in whom we set our hope and faith.

And once we have set ourselves on this truth – the truth of God as the singular god of creation in whom we set our hope and faith – we will have genuine mutual love.

The author is not making up any new criteria in this text. This is not a *new* revelation of what it means to follow God or to be a disciple of Christ. Indeed, just a couple of weeks ago on Holy Thursday, we read in John 13 the *mandatum ovum* (the “New Commandment”), in which Jesus stipulates that the way people will know we are *his* disciples is through our love for one another. After washing the feet of the disciples in the upper room, Jesus says, “Do to others as I have done to you – that is how you follow me” ... this is what love looks like.

In the First Epistle of Peter, in this text written to a second generation of Christians, those removed from the days of Jesus’ human existence, to those who did not have the historical Jewish understanding of faith in the singular God, the author writes up front two primary words of instruction for maintaining faith as a people of Christ amidst a changing world: first, do not trust in the perishable systems of society, but trust in God as witnessed in the resurrection Jesus Christ; and second, have a genuine mutual love for one another, a love offered deeply from the heart.

This is what was being instructed to the Christian faithful just *one* generation removed from Christ. Consider if the author were writing this to us today, who are about 80 generations removed from Christ. Honestly, I don’t think the author would be changing much in these first two imperatives for those who claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

We are still struggling to see God through Christ as our eternal and unperishable giver of living hope and salvation. In the world today, silver and gold are not quite as foundational to our economy as they were 2000 years ago, (that is, they aren’t used as the common currency,) but

they are still very much a factor in generational wealth. The market is still bullish on gold, suggesting that in a volatile market, precious metals are still a worthy long-term investment.

But as a society – especially an American society – we do not just put our living hope in precious metals and stock investments, we also put our hope in iron and steel. In our nation, there are more guns than citizens. Even as the largest nation in the world that even attempts to call itself a “Christian” nation, we have built up for ourselves a false sense of security through the weaponizing of the average household. Indeed, if guns were evenly distributed among households in our nation (which, we know they are not), every households would have 3 or more guns.

I imagine that should the author of First Peter be writing to us today, his letter might read something like this: “You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like guns and ammo, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.” Truly, I think we have some Christ-proclaiming folks who believe more firmly in their guns than they do the empty tomb.

And if the first imperative is not enough to call us to a new way of living, the second should be: “Now that you have purified your souls by obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.”

My friends, what kind of mutual love shoots a child looking for their friend who mistakenly knocked on the door at the wrong address? What kind of genuine mutual love pulls the trigger on a young adult for simply pulling in to the wrong driveway? What kind of mutual love doesn’t put restrictions on who can have access to such deadly weapons? What kind of genuine love for the other doesn’t acknowledge that we have a problem, an obsession, perhaps even an addiction that is detrimental to the community – the our corporate and societal well-being?

One does not need to be personally affected by such travesties to have a care for those being shot or negatively impacted. Genuine mutual love does not require a personal association. Genuine mutual love does not require close approximation or familial knowledge of the other. If we love deeply from the heart, it is enough to know that others are hurting, and that something *can* be done about it. It is enough to know that more people don’t have to die. It is enough to know that something is wrong; something in our society is not the way God would have it be; something in our own societal backyard is stripping God’s created from living the life God gifted them. And as a people of mutual love, of genuine mutual love, we should care, and we should do something to give life where death seems imminent.

And no, I do not think that First Peter had in mind the gross over-weaponization of America in the 21st Century when writing this text to the gentiles around the Mediterranean in the First Century. But here in lies the gift of God’s Living Word – the Word is not stagnant. Though the author mentions gold and silver, investments in the Dow are also in play. Though the author is likely speaking of the polytheism of the gentiles’ ancestors, the racism of our own nations’ history is not excluded. Though the author speaks in the framework of an agricultural society

(referencing the imperishable seed), these words are just as applicable in our own post-industrial society.

The call of the author – the proclamation of the Word of God – is a continual invitation to turn from the ways of the world, which are perishable and detrimental by nature, to accept a living hope and eternal inheritance that is marked by the conquering of death by life, the resurrection of Christ from the tomb, and the embrace of mutual love by all who profess the holy name of the Lord.

These imperatives are not requirements to have faith. This way of living is not an entrance exam into the community of Christ. But be assured, the apostle was firm in his belief that this was *the way* of following Christ. These are the expected outcomes of faith in God as witnessed in the resurrected Christ, that we might have self-sacrificial love for the other.

So may we be redirected to see the awesome grace of God in Jesus Christ, proclaiming life as Easter people, and continuing to proclaim God's message of new life for all people even in the world today, acknowledging the gift of imperishable love in the living and enduring word of God. Amen.

ⁱ Catherine Gunsales González. *1 & 2 Peter and Jude: Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Fred Craddock. *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year A*. UK: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1992.