
Purified through Faith

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 23 April 2023

Acts 2:14a, 36-41 • 1 Peter 1:17-23 • Luke 24:13-35



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

“You have purified yourself by obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love.”

I read that sentence from our 1 Peter reading today, and I stopped and thought about it for a long time. The Bible is like that; have you noticed? There is so much between the covers of this book. Things that you have read a thousand times will still arrest you, stop you in your tracks, while new meaning comes into your mind. It's a good way to read the Bible, actually: a little at a time. Reading the Bible is not a contest; whoever finishes first doesn't get the prize. (Which is a good thing, considering it's a couple of thousand pages long.) I have read the Bible straight through a couple of times, taking two or three chapters a day, and it takes about six months. But you learn so much from going straight through.

Anyway — this line from 1 Peter. He is writing to the exiles from Judea, those now living in Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and a few other places. They are new

Christians and he writes to give them confidence in their faith and to wish them peace. His letter to them begins with a great, quick summary of our faith:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1 Peter 1:3)

In this acclamation Peter identifies Christ as our Lord, as the Son of God, and as the Saviour who defeated death. Because God raised Jesus from death, God will raise us as well — that is not a forlorn hope, not a faint hope, but a living hope. Christ's resurrection made ours possible, for if Christ has not risen, neither could we. As Paul says, if Christ did not rise, our faith is null. We as Christians believe this to be true because of the witness of those who saw the empty tomb, Simon Peter and Mary Magdalene and the rest, and told their stories through the Gospel writers. They also related a great number of Resurrection appearances, from the upper room to the road to Emmaus, the subject of our Luke passage today.

The Emmaus story is a particularly good one, for it represents the witness of two of Jesus's followers, who were present in Jerusalem during the turbulent last days of Jesus' earthly life. Luke tells a straightforward tale: our two disciples are walking to a nearby village and fall into conversation with a stranger, who seems not to know about the events in Jerusalem. Yet this stranger is greatly learned in Scripture, and as they walk along, he tells the two men about this Jesus they mentioned. They must have thought he was a rabbi or a priest, for he explains to them all the references to Jesus from what we now call the Old Testament. It must have been rather poignant to hear what the stranger had to say in speaking about the teacher whose loss they mourned. All the more surprising, then, was his revelation as Jesus himself, when they broke bread together!

Jesus revealed himself in this way in order to teach these two disciples how they should view him — not just as a teacher who had been lost to execution, and not just a focus of wonder due to his miraculous resurrection. That resurrection was indeed wonderful. But I believe Jesus wanted them to understand that this was all the plan of our good and merciful God, a plan hatched before time began. He wanted them to believe in him as the Son of God, who would be with them forever, in their hearts and in their heads through his Spirit. God always intended this, from the beginning of the world. Jesus defeated death so that they could also defeat death. This is the truth of his resurrection, and it compels us to not only believe with our minds, but to live in that truth. Such truth — such faith — such belief — changes us. We are purified. We are reborn.

You know that our minds affect our bodies. Some conditions are psychosomatic, a word derived from two Greek words meaning “mind” and

“body”. We can literally imagine ourselves ill. Or we can think ourselves well. Within limits, of course. Faith in God — faith in the truth about God — what Peter refers to when he says “obedience to the truth” — purifies our minds and our souls to allow us to love God with our whole hearts and minds and souls and bodies, as Jesus asks us to do. Without faith in the truth of the Resurrection, we cannot attain to that love; with that faith, we have genuine godly love, both for God and for each other. And so Peter tells his fellow Christians who are far away from Judea: “You have purified yourself by obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love.”

This process of purification may be life-long. I believe that God changes us over time, once we accept Jesus as our Saviour. Many people report an immediate change in the way they feel and the way they look at the world following their commitment to Christ; others feel it more gradually. Either way, I think God continues to develop us as disciples, so that over time we come to understand God and God’s plan for us better and better.

I know with myself my understanding of Scripture has grown over time. Of course one would expect to understand anything better through study, but I believe God has guided me to the type of study, to certain books and other sources, and perhaps to certain people from whom I can learn more and increase my understanding. Along the way I think I have also learned something about distinguishing between true knowledge and false, just as Jesus told his disciples they must do when he warned them of false prophets.

Besides that, I *want* to understand better. I want to learn more and more about God and Jesus and the Spirit. The more I study, the more I want to know. God has planted a thirst for knowledge in me, and I rejoice in the fact that God wants me to know him better. God does not hide himself from us; only our ignorance or indifference does that. And God has created a world which he wants us to explore, for in learning about the world, we learn about its Creator.

Finally, the more we learn about God, the more we love God. Again, that quote from Peter: “You have purified yourself by obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love.” Love of God grows with knowledge, and love of our fellow Christians also grows with knowledge. And that love, too, drives us to know more. It is a beneficial interworking of faith, love and knowledge through the grace of God. And just as the disciples grew in knowledge on their walk to Emmaus in company with Jesus, we too grow and learn on our road toward our final complete reconciliation with our heavenly Father. Amen.