

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, 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 men 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 stands forever.”*

And this is the word that was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:22-25)

Start Again!

Is starting again a good thing or a bad thing? If you've been working on your computer for hours, writing a paper or filling out some on-line form for the government and your computer suddenly gives you the blue screen of death and all your work is lost, starting over is not a good thing. But if your job isn't going well or your marriage has problems, a new start can be a good thing. A new job might be a great opportunity to put into practice what you've learned. A husband and wife might agree to try and start over to avoid the kinds of things that have hurt their marriage up to this point. Because we recognize that a new start can be a good thing, we have a tradition of starting over on January 1st. I'm talking about New Year's resolutions. Tonight is the time when many people make those resolutions. Some New Year's resolutions are to stop negative things. Others are to improve on things that are already going well. That, too, can be thought of as a new start, the way a new school year or a new project is a new and exciting opportunity to put all that you've learned into an even better effort. Tonight, St. Peter talks to us about new starts. He wasn't thinking of New Year's resolutions. He was thinking about continually restarting our Christian lives. Each day is a new opportunity for us to live our faith. So, my friends, **start again!**

I. Restart your life of love!

II. Restart the life that comes from God's Word.

I.

Peter is not accusing us of failing in our lives of Christian love. Rather, he recognizes that we live in a sinful world and we all have sinful natures lurking in our hearts, just waiting to sabotage our efforts to live as children of God. So he's talking about an ongoing need to renew our commitment to the Lord. That means that we need to constantly renew our commitment to love one another. **Start again! Restart your life of love!**

Peter tells us to love one another deeply, from the heart. He's not talking about romantic love. He's talking about Christian fellowship. I've often emphasized the fact that the Greek word Peter uses here for "love" really speaks less of emotion than it does of actions and choices. This word is about sacrificing ourselves for the good of the people we love, whether they deserve it or not, indeed, whether we feel it or not. That's all true. But in this context, Peter does introduce an element of emotion when he says "from the heart" and speaks of depth of love. That certainly does imply at least a change of attitude inside me.

He tells us why: we have purified ourselves so that we have sincere love for our brothers. Now, this is a very free translation. And without getting into all the technical Greek issues involved here, the point Peter is making is that being a believer means a commitment to brotherly love. The word he uses here for love is different from that word that doesn't have a lot of emotional content. This word very much includes emotion. It includes the caring and the relationships that develop because we are together here in the body of Christ standing against the attacks of this world, striving to build each other up and to comfort and encourage one another. When we do that together, we are going to feel something. Our goal is the kind of life that gives birth to love, both the feeling and the doing kind.

Where does that all come from? From being born again. In Christ, we have a true restart to our lives. Peter says that we were born again not of perishable seed but of imperishable. "Perishable" means things that can die. That's our body, right? Every one of us is going to die, if the Lord doesn't come back first. When we

were born into this world, our parents were already on the road to the grave and we joined them there. But when we came to faith, God gave birth to us spiritually. He gave us a new life that does not die. It begins down here in this dying world, but even when these bodies die, that new life continues in heaven. And because we have that new life, these bodies are going to rise on Judgment Day and live forever.

So that we have all that, Peter says that we were purified. He literally says that our souls were purified. What does that mean? It means that our souls weren't pure to begin with. They were filthy with sin. Just before Christmas, the sewer drain in our basement backed up. It wasn't terrible, but it was enough. Even though the water that came up was clear, my wife had to use bleach to kill the germs that came up with that sewer water. The fact that the water was clear didn't mean it was drinkable. That fact that most people we know seem like good people doesn't mean they're spiritually pure. We all are born sinners. Even if we're good neighbors and loving parents and friendly people, even if we never rob banks or sell drugs to kids, we're still sinners. Our souls are still filthy before God the way we were born. We needed to be cleaned. That's what Jesus did for us. He was born just like we are from a perishable, dying mother. But he was also the Son of God. He lived a perfect life in our place. God gives us credit for his pure, sinless life. Then Jesus offered that life on the cross to pay for all our sins. His blood is the bleach that kills the germs, if you will. His blood washes us clean in God's sight and takes our sin away.

Peter says we are purified "by obeying the truth." The truth of Christ has to come to us personally to wash us clean. As long as the bleach stayed in the bottle, it didn't disinfect our basement. My wife had to apply it to the floor. The blood of Christ has to get out of the bottle and come to us personally. We are purified through the gospel. It comes to us and God gives us faith. Faith is what Peter means by obeying the truth. It's knowing that Jesus is our Savior. That purifies our souls in the sense that God sees us as pure. But it also purifies our souls in the sense that it changes how we live. It makes us want to follow Christ.

Now that we are born again, now that we are purified in our souls before God, we want to purify our lives every day. We want to love one another, sincerely and from the heart. We want to encourage one another and strengthen each other. We want to sacrifice ourselves for the good of the people around us. And while we live for each other, we will grow in our feelings of love for one another. That love needs to start over every single day. Yesterday's hurts are forgiven. Today we love the one who hurt us. Yesterday's failures are wiped away in Christ's love. Today we love better than we did yesterday. Yesterday's weakness is strengthened through the love that God's people showed us. Today we love the ones who took the time to point us to Christ, to hear our hurts, to hold us and wipe away our tears, and to rebuke us and call us to live as God commands. As long as we live here, every day we will need to restart our lives of love.

II.

How can we possibly do that? I often beat myself up because I'm not good at showing love. I'm not a touchy-feely kind of guy. I'm impatient with other people's drama. I don't express love to my wife, to my children, to my congregation as clearly or as often as I should. Does that sound familiar? It's the curse of sin in our lives. Even though God has purified us and made us new in Christ, as long as we live here, we still have that sinful nature waiting to sabotage that life of love. So how can we overcome it? By starting over, again and again. We start over where God starts: with his Word. My friends, **start again! Restart the life that comes from God's Word!**

The Word is the very power of God. Even the law has the power of the Holy Spirit to condemn us and cause us to despair. But the power to save us, to lift us up, to restart our lives of faith comes from the gospel. That gospel will never fail us. Peter says, **"For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God."** The new life doesn't come from those dying parents who gave us these dying bodies. It comes from the Word of God that can never die.

To drive his point home, Peter quotes from the prophet Isaiah: **"All men 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 stands forever."** It's kind of hard to imagine right now, because we're having record low temperatures, but think of the green grass of a summer field. Think of wild flowers growing in it. Last summer, while we were on vacation, we drove past beautiful purple wildflowers growing in the grass along the side of the road. Right now, all those flowers are dead. The grass is yellow and broken and possibly under a foot of snow. The process was a little different in Israel because they don't have the kind of northern winters we do, but the point is the same. All that we are, all that we do is dying. It's not just our bodies. All that we make will pass away.

In my office, I have dozens of books. Many of them are out of print and will never be printed again. Some pastor somewhere spent untold hours writing those books – probably on a typewriter. Some workers set the type for page after page. But now, those books are all but forgotten. We often see pictures of homes decaying in Detroit. Once those neighborhoods were new and full of life. Those houses were attractive and people wanted to live in them. Today, thousands of them are abandoned and falling down. Nothing that we build, nothing that we do, nothing that we create here can possibly last. The grass withers and the flowers fall.

But the Word of our God stands forever. God has spoken and nothing can unsay what he has said. God has declared us righteous in his sight. The devil can't change that. Our own sin can't void what he has said. God has promised that we will live with him forever. Our souls will live even if our bodies die. And Christ will return and all believers will rise and live with him forever. No power on earth or in hell can change that promise. God has said that he will care for us, he will stand by us, he will sustain our faith and bring us home. No tragedy here can break his Word. God has called to live in love for one another. And he has given us new birth so that today, there is inside us a living believer who wants to do his will and who does love. No matter how much our sinful nature rages against that truth, no matter how deeply the devil plots against that believer inside us, no matter how hard our sinful world tries to crush our faith, the Word of God stands forever and that Word keeps that believer inside us alive and gives us the faith to love one another. No matter how many times we have failed, no matter how often we have sinned against our own fellowship here, God has spoken the Word of forgiveness. That Word stands forever. It renews us in our lives of love.

Start again my friends. Restart your life of love. It lasts all the way into eternity. Restart it every day. Restart the life that comes from God's Word. That power of God will power your life of love through all the days of life here and through all the days of eternity. Amen.