

### **Born to Love. 1 Peter 1:22-25**

What did you do on Friday? Jayne and I had tea with the family, inside, around a table – the first time I had eaten a meal inside with someone other than Jayne for 78 days, or eleven weeks.

And no reflection on her company - but it was good, so good.

Friday started a transition for us individually and collectively not just out of lockdowns, but away from lockdowns, a new stage in the way our community deals with the presence of the Corona virus amongst us.

It is exciting – for lockdowns, while they inhibit the spread of the virus, do harm. Harm to individuals – their mental health, their schooling, their finances, and harm to communities, putting them under a pressure that can expose the cracks, the divisions amongst us.

And Friday's changes give hope – hope of being able to resume doing things we love – like meet with family and friends, travel to visit family in the country or interstate, for many getting back to work

Hope of the restoration of freedoms, including our freedom to gather.

But it is also a little anxiety provoking for some – anxiety about the spread of the disease, anxiety about gathering with others

That anxiety and those divisions tell you that reaching the goal we all desire – a return to a better normal, where, for example in relation to church, we can resume our ministries and all gather confidently whatever our decisions about vaccination

Will be messy.

Messy because there will be changes to government requirements over the coming months that we will need to keep up with,

Messy because of the presence of the virus in the community which means we will have to keep up the work of keeping our gatherings Covid Safe, and there will be different degrees of confidence amongst us about gathering because the health of each one of us is different and our experience of the virus is different

Messy because it is possible there will be cases of Corona amongst us, we may even encounter someone infected at church

Messy because at the moment the government has prescribed different routes to normality for the vaccinated and unvaccinated

Potentially messy because of real division amongst us about vaccination and the government response to the health crisis, and its easy for misunderstanding to arise and offence to be taken where we are anxious, or angry

We are only at the start of the journey- and I expect it will take weeks and months for us all to feel confident to gather.

But we all want to get to the goal where we can all meet safely together - not just because it represents normality, but because of our common commitment to the Lord Jesus and what we share together in Him. We want to express in gathering that it is our common faith in Jesus, not what we think or do about vaccination, that is the basis of membership of Christ's people and being able to call the living God our Father.

What is important is we move through the mess we do so as genuine followers of Jesus, people who are characterised by the love the Lord Jesus said His people are to be known for in the world.

*John 13: <sup>34</sup> "I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. <sup>35</sup> **By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.**"*

Every step of the way, whatever our differences, our neighbours should see that we treat each other, fellow followers of Jesus, with love.

Love because we have been loved by Jesus

Love because there is nothing better than being a disciple of Jesus

So this morning/ this evening I am going to start by looking at the command to love in 1 Peter – because it will emphasise to us that this love for God's family in Christ is non negotiable.

Then I will remind us of the character of the love commanded by looking at some familiar New Testament passages.

And finally I want to engage you with the challenges and opportunities we have for love in our differences

### **Loving as Family.**

So – 1 Peter 1:21 – and this time I am going to read it from the ESV

*1 Peter 1: <sup>22</sup> Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, <sup>23</sup> since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; [ESV]*

There is the command - *love one another earnestly, perseveringly, from a pure heart*

That is how God's people are to live as they journey to their heavenly home

Three things to note.

Firstly, this is a command to do what we have been saved by Jesus to do.

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth is Peter's way of speaking of believing the gospel and its effects.

In chapter 1 verse 2 he had spoken of believers as chosen 'to be obedient and to be sprinkled with the blood of Jesus'.

Here in v. 21 Peter is referring to the effect of that obedience to the gospel call for repentance and faith in Jesus, the effect of believing the gospel that Christ has died for our sins and turning away from being the boss of our own lives to confess Jesus is Lord.

By that obedience Believers have 'purified their souls' – that is they have been cleansed, made fit for God's presence by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross – and while that is the whole person the emphasis is on their inner person, their thoughts and will. Jesus' sacrifice has included them in God's new covenant people who in the words of Ezekiel been cleansed of all their impurities and given new hearts. Ezek. 36:25-26

And Peter is saying that the purpose of being included in His new covenant people is that they show a sincere brotherly love for each other.

[The CSB makes brotherly love sound like it is the result of their pursuit of holiness. The ESV is better]

Let me unpack that 'brotherly love' a little more.

God's people, those saved by Jesus' death, are to think of themselves as a family with one Father, God.

In the world people get to choose those they will love. Not Christians. Christians are to love are those they haven't chosen. That's the way it is in families. You don't get a say as to who your siblings will be but you are to love them – just because they are your siblings, loved by your parents.

And brotherly love is a life long expectation, as long as you are a member of the family

And it is to be sincere – not play acting, not pretend. Not just a polite acknowledgement on a Sunday while you keep your distance.

The command *love one another earnestly, perseveringly, from a pure heart* is a command to do what we have been saved to do, to express the purpose of our being saved by Christ.

Secondly, this is a command to live as true children of our heavenly Father

*from a pure heart love one another constantly,<sup>23</sup> because you have been born again—not of perishable seed but of imperishable—through the living and enduring word of God.<sup>24</sup> For*

***All flesh is like grass,  
and all its glory like a flower of the grass.  
The grass withers, and the flower falls,  
<sup>25</sup> but the word of the Lord endures forever.***

*And this word is the gospel that was proclaimed to you.*

We are to love because we have been given new birth by God through His gospel word.

Why is being born again a reason to love one another constantly, deeply, eagerly?

Peter is telling us that as we have been born into this family where God is our Father and we are brothers and sisters by the work of God, our Father expects our life together to reflect our parentage.

This new life is completely different in origin and character from the life any human parent can give us. That life from human seed is transient, passing, failing.

But this new life, like the seed, the word, that brings it into being, is from God.

That word is enduring, and so the life it brings is enduring. This is our forever family.

And that word is the gospel word, the word that tells us of God's great love for His people, that our Father has loved us, every believer, so much that HE has given His Son Jesus for us. The life this seed begets must share the character of the Father revealed in his life giving word – it must be one of love for His loved children.

Without that love there is no evidence of the new life of God in us.

You cannot be a member of the Father's family, be a Christian, have received new birth – without this love.

And there is no believer whom you do not have to love.

And the third thing to note about the command *to love one another constantly, earnestly* is that obedience is particularly important for a community under pressure for love turns its back on community destroying behaviours

Peter continues

*And this word is the gospel that was proclaimed to you.*

*2 Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all slander.*

Commenting on that list and reflecting on the circumstances of Peter's readers, being tested in trials of various kinds, facing the suspicions and hostility of the surrounding culture,

Peter H Davids "Especially when a community is under pressure there is a tendency to begin bickering and division, which only makes the community that much more vulnerable to outside pressure"

But loving as we are commanded turns us away from those destructive behaviours.

And note particularly the last two, envy and slander.

It is a reminder that love rejoices with those who rejoice, even if those rejoicing are enjoying privileges and ease you might want for yourself and don't have

And love controls the tongue and the keyboard

*1 Peter 1: <sup>22</sup> Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, <sup>23</sup> since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; [ESV]*

Loving all our brothers and sisters, even those we disagree with, is not an option for believers in Jesus. It is the purpose of our salvation, and it is the sure sign of new birth by a heavenly Father who loves all His children.

Now this is not a surprise to readers of the New Testament. IT is full of instruction on love, and as love is what we really must focus on to get through the messiness of coming out of lockdown and not be ensnared in the devil's work of division through anger, lies and bitterness

I am going to remind you of the nature and character of the love commanded before engaging you with some of the challenges to and opportunities for love at this time.

## Loving as commanded

What does God's word have in mind when it speaks of the love we are to show to each other.

Firstly, it is modelled on Jesus' love for His people.

*John 13: <sup>34</sup> "I give you a new command: Love one another. **Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another.** <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

Familiar words, but it is a reminder that our love will cost us as it cost our Lord. And it will cost us to love others in the weeks to come, even if that cost is in overcoming our fears to meet, or to serve. And this love's goal is to promote relationship with our heavenly Father, to know His love, for this was the goal of Jesus' love.

And as it is the love of Jesus' disciples, it is a love that is committed to obeying Jesus. It takes its direction not from our feelings but from what our Lord teaches

*John 14: <sup>21</sup> The one who has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. And the one who loves me will be loved by my Father. I also will love him and will reveal myself to him."*

Another passage – 1 John 3 - Picking up on what Jesus commanded at the last Supper John emphasises again the necessity, cost and content of this love

*1 John 3: <sup>14</sup> We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers and sisters. The one who does not love remains in death. <sup>15</sup> Everyone who hates his brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him. <sup>16</sup> This is how we have come to know love: He laid down his life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. <sup>17</sup> If anyone has this world's goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from him—how does God's love reside in him? <sup>18</sup> Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth.*

The necessity v. 14. You either love and live, or refuse to love and die.

The cost v. 16. Love serves, gives up pleasing ourselves to promote the good of our brothers and sisters

The content vv. 17-18.

Love can't be mere sentiment. It is seen in what we do. It is practical and real, and shares the good things God has given us with those in need

And in being real, it also engages with the reality of the situation. Genuine love is never divorced from truth, for lies can never inform right action. As Paul says in 1 Cor. 13, love rejoices in the truth.

And let's hear the rest of what Paul says love is, and isn't.

*1 Corinthians 13: <sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, <sup>5</sup> is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

This is the kind of love we will need to show to each other if we are to get through this messy period. We will need, for example, a lot of patience and kindness in the coming weeks. And it will need to be love that is not just sentiment, but shows itself in action – in changing Sunday morning routines to come and gather in person, in giving up more of the day to serve, in initiating connecting again with each other in person.

And we will need to show this love in the context of acknowledging differences between us, differences that some of us may find hard to live with.

What are the challenges to and opportunities for our love in the midst of these differences?

### **Loving in Difference**

To help me and you think through this I have grouped the different challenges and opportunities according to how there are different ways of thinking amongst us about the seriousness of the disease and the effectiveness and safety of the vaccines.

Let me talk briefly about the axes – you can see them there – what we think about the disease, whether we think it is serious or not; and what we think about the vaccines, whether we think they are safe and effective or not.

	<b>COVID (not serious)</b>	<b>COVID (serious)</b>
<b>Vaccine (safe and effective)</b>	Not serious Vaccine safe/effective	Serious Vaccine safe/effective
<b>Vaccine (unsafe and ineffective)</b>	Not serious Vaccine unsafe/ineffective	Serious Vaccine unsafe/ineffective

There are other differences amongst us – what we think of the restrictions we have lived under, how we have experienced the lockdown – but I have chosen our attitudes to vaccination and disease to group our differences because what we believe about them does divide us, affects our choices, and gives rise to particular challenges to love and maintaining our unity in Christ.

Secondly, these axes, what we believe about the vaccine – safety and efficacy, and what we believe about the disease, represent scientific judgements, not theological or political judgements.

As scientific judgements they are judgements based on data and the interpretation of data and so, like all scientific judgements, they should be open to revision as new data emerges. Movement between the quadrants is possible as new data comes to light.

And that data is emerging at a great rate. We have had more time to learn about both the virus and the vaccine since the vaccines became available and the data, particularly on safety and efficacy, is accumulating. That data is also increasingly local as we watch what is happening in both NSW and Victoria with the spread of the virus, hospital admissions and deaths, and as the TGA collects and investigates reports of sickness and death associated with the vaccine. The vaccines are looking increasingly safe and effective in preventing hospitalisation and death

Thirdly, because these are scientific judgments and not political judgments there can be a great variety of positions about other things in each of the four quadrants. For example, You can believe the data says the vaccine is safe and effective while at the same time thinking the treatment of dissent or making people lose their jobs over a willingness to get vaccinated is heavy handed, or you can think the vaccine is ineffective and be fully committed to lockdown measures to keep people safe.

Fourthly, much of the value of this exercise may be in just recognising that there are differences amongst us – and none of the positions excludes anyone from the faith.

None of us are saved by getting everything right. We can even be deceived about some things and be diametrically opposed about some things – and still be brothers and sisters

The situation in Romans 14, which many have referred to when they think about how to live with these differences so that our unity is not destroyed, is not a perfect analogy to our situation, for differences over food and drink did not threaten anyone's health nor were subject to government regulation. But it is a passage that does tell us Christians can have deeply held differences which lead to exactly opposed behavioural outcomes – one eating meat, the other abstaining from meat; one keeping the sabbath, the other not – and still be brothers and sisters, servants of the same Lord.

That diversity can be a shock to us – but it is real

[How we hold those differences 14:5 “Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind”, doing it in honour of Jesus, v. 23 what does not proceed from faith is sin

How we live with those differences, acknowledging each one's independent accountability to the Lord Jesus 14:1, 7-12

What we are to pursue in difference – 14:19 – what promotes peace and builds one another up].

Let's look at each group, and I am going to start with the Covid is serious, and the vaccine is safe and effective – because that is the group I am in, and many of us are in.

Not all of us are the same in this group.

Some of us have convictions about the seriousness of the disease because of the evidence we have seen reported, the ICU admissions, the deaths and long Covid we have heard about happening here and overseas.

But others of us are convinced of the disease by personal experience, the experience of losing someone we love, of knowing friends and family who have long Covid. Those who are in the camp of not taking the disease seriously need to hear that.

In this group we have cheerfully gone along and got vaccinated. Life is opening up for us and many are getting more confident and more excited about getting back to near normal, but some,

convinced of the seriousness of the disease continue very concerned to keep all the measures that will control its spread

What are the challenges and opportunities for love we face?

There are many, some of which will be shared by other groups but for each group I want to highlight three. Challenges to love

1. Despising or looking down on the unvaccinated.

Despise is a strong and ugly word but it is the word Paul uses in Romans 14 of the attitude of the strong to the weak.

Someone you despise is someone you no longer think is worth bothering about. They've made their choices – and they should be left to them, and we will all move on. And when you despise someone you are Unsympathetic to the difficulties those who won't get vaccinated face, unsympathetic to their fears, unsympathetic even when they fall sick with Covid.

Happy to join the community pile on.

2. Anger at those who don't take the disease seriously and so flout the rules that will keep it in check, like mask wearing. Angry with them for the embarrassment they cause us in talking to our non-believing friends
3. We can become impatient with them – holding us back, continuing to threaten our hospital system – especially if you work in the system

And behind all that can lie a pride, puffed up in our certainty that we have got it right, affirmed by society's approval

All of those are real temptations, and all would be a failure of love

But if we are resolved to live obeying God's good command to love what are our opportunities, opportunities to show the world we are Jesus' disciples – and different because of that

1. We can accept one another as Paul says in Romans 14, acknowledging that someone who differs from us on the science of vaccination is still a brother or sister in Christ and so someone whose inclusion we should work for and welcome – in a Covid safe way, for the disease is real. At the moment that means making sure they can keep gathering to hear God's word in a smaller number, supporting that service where that might be needed. Later it might mean accepting arrangements that will allow us all to meet together at the one time – for love of Jesus. Love always needs courage to love those unlike ourselves.
2. It means relating with a kindness that is willing to sympathise, the love that can grieve with those who grieve – that can make space to feel their loss even where we disagree with their position.
3. Keeping on talking with them. Part of the issue is isolation. It has been easy to have nothing to do with those you never see. Love will stay in touch, and for some of us speaking the truth in love will mean keeping on talking about vaccination – giving an opportunity for people to test their position, confirm evidence. Romans 14:16 says 'Do not let your good be slandered'. Love is not accepting untruths but gently challenging them. Love creates room



for continued discussion and change – because, convinced of the vaccine’s safety and the seriousness of the disease love does want others to protect themselves.

Test all things. You may see other opportunities – but the important thing is that we are looking,

Next – the diametrically opposite group

Covid not serious, vaccine not safe and effective. If you are in this group you might think it presumptuous of me to speak of challenges, or fear that this is just another way of trying to change you because I am so clearly in favour of vaccination and thankful for it.

But I have spoken with one or two who hold this position, and I am speaking to you now on the assumption that you are fully convinced in your own mind that your position is consistent with your faith in Jesus, done to please Him, and that you are committed to loving your brothers and sisters for Jesus’ sake.

What challenges to that love does it seem to me you face.

1. Like the fully vaccinated, looking down on your brothers and sisters who don’t agree with you, thinking them compliant sheep led along by the spin of the government and media, without really doing their own research.
2. Outrage at the government’s restrictions, particularly the mandating of vaccination for all kinds of groups, an outrage that can see anyone not actively opposing it as compliant with evil, or anyone operating within those restrictions – say having services that are open only to the fully vaccinated as we will have, as well as a service for those whose vaccine status is unknown – as betraying believers like you.
3. Judging others, condemning their lack of integrity or faith. I was speaking to another Pastor who had several frail, elderly people in his congregation who wanted to come back to church – for they had been suffering in isolation – but who indicated to him that they would only feel comfortable in a vaccinated only gathering. He was planning to run that as well as the vaccination status unknown service he had already decided to run and was promptly accused of compromising the gospel, and those elderly believers accused of faithlessness for not being willing to risk death for the sake of all meeting together. There is a lot of judging going on.

What are the opportunities for loving others that those who believe the disease is not serious and the vaccine not safe and effective.

1. In line with Romans 14 to give up that judging of others, and to accept those who differ from them as brothers and sisters who, like them, are acting out of conviction knowing they are accountable to the Lord Jesus. In particular to accept that trying to love others in opening up services only to the fully vaccinated is not abandoning the gospel, nor is it a failure to love them. We desire all to be able to meet together based on their confession of Christ, but we can’t always have what we desire, and we can desire many things at the same time that sometimes conflict. In our case we desire to end the damage being done by not opening by opening as soon as we reasonably can, which is on the 7<sup>th</sup> November – and we want that because we also love the single, those with young families for whom the live stream is

proving so difficult, and the community that benefits from a communal gospel witness. Love will be glad for the good that we can do them by starting to meet together.

2. You have an opportunity to love by accepting imperfect love. Meeting in a smaller group might fall short of what you expect, but we are running it because we love you and want you to have the encouragement of meeting with others around the Word. You can love by not isolating yourself, separating yourself – and coming to that smaller meeting while we wait the removal of the requirement to check vaccine status. Session wants that and has written to request that, and our letter will be on the website. Don't let the pursuit of the perfect be the enemy of the good, and it is good to meet with other believers to hear God's word, pray together, sing His praise – even if it is behind masks and in a smaller number.
3. Abandon outrage. James says James 1:19 *everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger*. Remember what Paul said – Love is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs. Neither does it provoke, and so it would not be loving if you are not yet fully vaccinated to seek entry to a gathering for the fully vaccinated just to make a point. Abandoning outrage may involve you in grappling with God's sovereignty so that like Joseph you can say of those you think are wronging you 'You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.' Trusting in the love of your sovereign Father is at the heart of being able to be generous, kind and patient to others.

Test all things.

What of those who are in the Covid is a real and serious disease, but are convinced the vaccine is unsafe.

Let me say from the outset I grieve for the difficult position you are in. Don't think that we think any less of you as fellow believers by disagreeing about the scientific evidence.

This is the time to remind us all that some have real reasons for being concerned about the vaccine's safety – past experience of vaccines, even past unhelpful experiences of doctors; knowing someone close to them who has suffered a serious vaccine side effect; or being caught up in the mixed, ambiguous messaging that accompanied the early days of the vaccine roll out

What challenges does this group face to love?

1. The danger of withdrawing – either because they are fearful of catching the disease, or they dread the conversations, or the condemnation.
2. Becoming resentful of the pressure they are put under to get vaccinated, even from well intended brothers and sisters who in love would want them to protect themselves from the virus.

What opportunities for love?

1. Having the courage to stay connected, to not be excluded – to come to the vaccinations status unknown service to encourage and be encouraged.
2. To keep modelling faith in God, the faith that trusts Him in the difficult circumstance of lives and livelihoods being threatened by the disease
3. To keep on being patient with those whose well intentioned concern can irritate, to keep on believing the best of people's intentions, so that conversation can continue

And the fourth group, those who think the disease is not particularly serious, at least not for them, and who think the vaccine safe.

What a happy place to be!

But if that is you recognise the challenges to your loving brothers and sisters who are not like you.

1. Discounting the concerns of others, to think that because these things don't trouble you there really is not much reason for anyone to be troubled – and so to get irritated with those who get upset with your casual engagement with covid safe requirements like mask wearing and social distancing.
2. To judge and speak poorly of those who do have conviction about the seriousness of the disease – to think of them as uptight, even lacking faith, or just plain interfering
3. And equally to get impatient with those not being vaccinated because they are stopping things getting back to normal for you as quickly as possible

You in this group have great opportunities for love

1. You can serve in love. Vaccinated and unconcerned it will be easier to be involved in getting Sunday School going, or welcoming, or helping out with the three o'clock service if needed.
2. To put no stumbling block in the way of others by cheerfully observing the covid safe measures in their presence. That is something Paul recommends in Romans 14, not using the freedoms we feel we have so that others don't take offence, are deterred from meeting
3. To be patient with those who lack your unconcern, and to stay in contact with them to encourage them.

Brothers and sisters I know as we start to move away from lockdowns, as the possibility of in person meeting is now very near, many of us are tired, and we are in different places in relation to the way we think and feel about the seriousness of the disease, about the safety and efficacy of the vaccines, about how we have experienced the lockdown and its restrictions.

We will, Lord willing, open up four services on the 7<sup>th</sup> – three to the fully vaccinated and one at three for those whose vaccine status is unknown, and if registration for that service shows we need to do more, we will

Meeting is good for us and the possibility to meet is an answer to prayers

Let's make sure that through this messy time we keep on being Jesus' people, people known for their love of each other even in our differences,

I have sought this morning to engage you with what that might mean for you. I may not have portrayed your challenges and opportunities as you see them – but I have put the command of God before you, to love one another deeply, earnestly, perseveringly

To turn aside from those things that would do the devil's work of dividing and discouraging – from looking down on others and judging them, from anger, from thoughtlessness, from careless words and speech

And to practice a love that is patient and kind, that can rejoice with those who rejoice and grieve with those who grieve, that is willing as our Lord was to pay a cost to love.

That commitment to love starts in our hearts. With our conviction that Jesus is Lord, and that He commands us for our good because we know He loves us. With our conviction that our heavenly Father is sovereign over all things and will work the circumstances we face for our good so we are not ultimately harmed by others sins against us. With a love for Jesus that wants to love those who are beloved by Him, every believer in Christ.

So if you find yourself struggling to love in the coming weeks and months, start there, in your heart. Confess the struggle, the anger, the resentment, the impatience, even the little faith – whatever it is.

And ask that as these times put our obedience to Jesus under pressure we would know more of the love of Jesus for us and so be strengthened and empowered by God's Spirit so that

*Ephesians 4: I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup>with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup>eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*