

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 5, 2019**

**ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH:
THE CHURCH**

1 Peter 2:4-10

As we continue our examination of the EPC *Essentials of Our Faith*, I invite you to turn in your Bible or, if you prefer, to your bulletin this morning where you will find the words of 1 Peter 2:4-10 printed. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

May God bless to our hearts and minds and lives this reading from his Word.

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I want to talk about the church this morning and what the Bible has to say about it. The first thing to say about it is that despite all its problems, imperfections, and seeming impotence; despite all its faults, failures and foibles; despite all its embarrassments and errors; despite all its messes and mistakes; despite all the ways the church has failed to live up to its calling in the world; despite all the times and ways the church (and its leaders and members) reflects the world and its values instead of Jesus and His values; despite all these things, Jesus still loves the church. Passionately. With an undying, unfailing, unchanging sacrificial love. In Ephesians 5, Paul instructs husbands to love their wives "just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (5:25). As usual, Eugene Peterson says it beautifully in *The Message*: "Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church – a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything He does and says is designed to bring the best out of her" (5:25-26). Jesus went "all out" for the church because He is "all in."

Jesus loves His church. So much that He gave His life for it. For her. His love for the church will never falter. It will never change.

Jesus does not love His church only in a global sense. He does not only love the capital "C" Church. He loves every small "c" church, too, from the tiniest congregation of believers to the biggest mega-church you can imagine. So I can say with total confidence that Jesus loves *this* church. Jesus loves *Faith Church*. Jesus loves this family of believers who gather at 5725 Castlewella Drive in Kingstowne, Virginia every week for worship, fellowship, prayer, instruction and encouragement in the things of God, ministry to one another and marching orders for our ministry in the world.

Despite everything that is wrong with it, Jesus loves the church. So do I. Jesus loves *this* church. So do I. I hope you know how much I love and care about this church, how much I love and care about you. It is a priceless privilege to be your pastor.

I thank God for you. I thank God for this church, for its witness to the gospel, its faithfulness to God's Word, and the love you have for God, for one another, and for a world full of sinners (like us) who need a Savior.

I thank God that, despite *our* imperfections, this church is a place of grace where Jesus is Lord and every person counts. I believe this is what Jesus wants His church to be:

- A place where grace abounds to imperfect people (which is the only kind of people there are, except for Jesus) – grace that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will;
- A place where we who have received God's grace extend grace to one another;
- A place where Jesus is exalted as the true and only Son of God and Savior of sinners, who took on our flesh and blood in order to pay for *our* sins with *His* life;
- A place where Jesus is honored and exalted as the King of our lives, the Head of the church, and the Lord of all things; and
- A place where every person counts, including you. No one in the church is insignificant. Every person matters to God. Whenever we treat someone as if they are insignificant, or unworthy of our attention or respect, we dishonor the name of Jesus.

The church is meant to be a place of grace where Jesus is Lord and every person counts. It is meant to be a community or fellowship of grace where we love God first and best of all, where we love one another as Jesus has loved us, and where we love our neighbors – our community and the world around us – with God's kind of love. This is what the church is meant to be, and it is what we aspire to be in our life and ministry together here in Kingstowne and beyond.

Even though Peter doesn't use the word "church" in the verses we read from 1 Peter 2, it is obvious that he is talking about the church. The New Testament word for "church" – the Greek word *ekklesia* – occurs more than 100 times in the New Testament. But it is used by Jesus only twice in the Gospels, both times in the Gospel of Matthew:

- First, in Matthew 16:18, where, in response to Peter's confession of Him as "the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the living God" (16:16), Jesus says: "On this rock" – meaning the foundation of this faith in Him – "I will build my church."
- Second, in Matthew 18:17, where Jesus is giving instructions to His disciples on how to deal with sin, offense, or unresolved conflict in the fellowship of believers.

The word *ekklesia* literally means "called out." The word helps us to understand the church as the "called out" people of God, the "called out assembly" of men and women, girls and boys, young and old, from every race, language, nation, continent, and socio-economic status who embrace, believe in, and follow Jesus Christ as the one and only Savior of sinners and Lord of all. The *ekklesia* consists of those in every age and generation whom God has graciously and sovereignly called out from the world to be His new covenant people.

So, the church is called out and set apart from the world at large *by* God. The church is called out and set apart *for* God. (Which means that the church is to be *different* from the world in which it exists.) The church is called out *by* God to belong *to* Him. The church is called out *by* God to be *in* the world but different *from* the world. The church is to be *in* the world (not

cut off from it) but distinct *from* the world. We are called out *from* the world and then sent back *into* the world to live, love, care, serve, preach, teach, bless, heal, and give in the name of Jesus. We are called out and commissioned by Jesus to make the love of God visible and to make disciples in the mission fields where we live and work and go to school; right here in Kingstowne where we gather for worship; in mission fields such as France, Mexico, Haiti, Kentucky, and North Carolina; and in hard places like the Caucasus region of Russia and other majority Muslim communities and nations.

Our church ... Of course, it isn't *our* church; it doesn't belong to us; the church belongs to Jesus; He said: "I will build *my church*" (Matthew 16:18, *emphasis added*). *Every church* is meant to be an outpost of heaven in a world where sin and evil abound, a mission outpost placed in the world by God to bear faithful witness to the gospel of His grace in Jesus Christ and to model what life is like in the kingdom of God (adapted from Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor*, 110).

In the verses we read, Peter uses several word pictures or metaphors to describe the church. We barely have time to skim the surface of their meaning this morning. But notice: First, in verse 5, he says that we and all who trust in Jesus for salvation are "living stones" which are "being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood" to offer "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

When we come to Jesus in faith and He makes us spiritually alive in Him, we become "living stones" that Jesus Himself is using to build His church – not a physical edifice like the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris or Westminster Abbey in London or the National Cathedral in Washington, but a "spiritual house" consisting of ordinary people like you and me who have said "Yes" to Jesus as Savior and Lord of our lives. We are the stones or bricks Jesus is using in the spiritual construction project of building His church. And yes, every stone matters. Every brick counts. Every "living stone" has a place in the magnificent spiritual cathedral Jesus is building. Including you and me.

Peter doesn't spell out what he means by "spiritual sacrifices," but there are other Bible verses to help us flesh it out. Romans 12:1 says that we are to "offer (our) bodies" – meaning our whole selves – "as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, which," says Paul, "is (our) spiritual act of worship." Hebrews 13:15 urges us to "continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess His name." The very next verse, Hebrews 13:16, reminds us to "not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." David says in Psalm 51:17 that "the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart (the Lord) will not despise." And the Lord tells us in Hosea 6:6 that what He desires is mercy, not ritual sacrifices offered because we are supposed to.

To come before God in humility with a broken and contrite heart; to offer yourself as a living sacrifice on the altar of God's service; to offer the sacrifice of praise and worship to God in both private and public; to do good whenever you have the opportunity; to share what you have with those in need (even something as simple as a blessing bag); and to show mercy to others in the name and spirit of Jesus. These are all ways for us to offer spiritual sacrifices that bring pleasure to God.

In verses 7 and 8, Peter touches very briefly on the consequences of rejecting Jesus, God's chosen Cornerstone, of refusing to believe in Him, of turning your back on the gift of salvation He offers. The consequences are real and serious. The consequences are not pleasant. And they are forever. So, please, do not think that what you do with Jesus or how you respond to Him doesn't matter. It does matter. Jesus is not optional. He is essential. What you do with Him has eternal consequences.

But then in verse 9, Peter uses that little word "but." He says: "But you...." Then he rattles off four more descriptive phrases to explain who we are as members of Christ's church. By the grace of God, we are "a chosen people" chosen by God to be His people. We are "a royal priesthood." In verse 5 he says we are "a holy priesthood." The word *holy* shows that we are all set apart by God to do priestly work – to go into God's presence on behalf of others. The word *royal* shows that our priestly work in ministering to one another is done in the service of the king. In the service of King Jesus.

By the grace of God, we are "a holy nation," set apart by God, for God, and consecrated to God's service in the world. By God's grace, we are "a people who belong to God." Another translation says we are "God's special possession." What makes us special is that we belong to God. We don't belong to God because there is something special about us. We are special because we belong to God. Our specialness comes from Jesus and His saving grace in our lives. And we want the whole world to discover and experience the specialness of knowing Jesus and belonging to Him.

That is why, as God's special possession, our mission is to "declare the excellencies of Him who called (us) out of darkness into His marvelous light" (ESV). To say it another way, the job of the church – the job of *our* church, the job of *Faith Church*, the job of *every* church – is to "advertise" (Edwin Blum, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: 1 Peter*, 231) who God is and what He has done for us and for our salvation. The job of the church – of all of us together and of each of us as individual followers of Jesus – is to make Jesus known and to invite others to believe in him and become His disciples.

The question for us as a church, and the question for each of us to consider, is this: How are we doing in our job? How are you doing? How am I doing? How does our life as a church advertise the excellencies of God and the beauty of the gospel? How does your life advertise the love of God and the grace of the gospel?

What can we do, or do better, as a church to be who we are by the grace of God and to advertise the greatness of God in our witness and acts of service? What can you do, or do better, to be a living, breathing advertisement of the love of God and the power of the gospel?

I urge you to ponder these questions this week. And to let God use you as a representative of His church to advertise who He is, what He has done, and His desire for people everywhere to know Him personally.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.