

Kings and Priests, Part 2 (1 Peter 2:4-10)
January 30, 2005
(Sermon Notes/Transcript)

By Rich Lusk

Modern Americans are some of the loneliest people on the face of the earth. America has become a nation of loners.

Community is hard to come by. We probably have experienced this in our neighborhoods or at school or at work, but statistics bear it out as well.

Community gatherings and signs of friendship have markedly decreased over the last 25 years.

For example (mostly taken from Mark Driscoll's book *Radical Reformation*):

Playing cards as a social activity is down 25%.

Frequenting taverns – the long time gathering place, especially for male friendships -- is down 40%.

The number of full service restaurants has decreased 25%, but the number of fast food outlets has increased 100%, as more and more people eat alone and in their cars.

Having a social evening with someone from one's neighborhood is down 33%.

Family dinners are down 33%.

Having friends over into one's home is down a shocking 45%.

From 1980 to 1993, participation in America's number one participant sport, bowling, was up 10%, but the number of bowling leagues decreased 40%, as more people bowled alone. In fact, Robert Putnam wrote a book, *Bowling Alone*, to look at this shift.

From 1985 to 1999, the readiness of the average American to make new friends declined by nearly 33%.

As Driscoll, points out, people are increasingly busy, isolated, and disconnected. The isolation is now so deeply entrenched that many people do not know how to practice hospitality or friendship. This trend away from community is even reflected in new home architecture, in which large living and dining rooms designed for human contact and fellowship, are replaced with personal entertainment rooms, with large TVs in the center.

Driscoll goes on to point out that the time, money, and energy previous generations spent on building friendships and community are increasingly spent on impersonal and solitary pursuits. For example, people watch more TV than ever now. In fact, TV has become a surrogate friend for many people, who will spend hours watching shows about relationships to make up for their own solitude. They turn on the TV as a way of dealing with loneliness, a way of coping with isolation. Over the last fifteen years, the amount of time people spend caring for pets has increased about 20%. I have nothing against pets, but pets are often now substitutes for human contact. The saying "Dog is man's best friend" has taken on a new meaning -- the dog is often the *only* friend he has. The time spent on improving one's personal appearance (standing in front of the mirror) has increased about 10%. The number of people taking medication for depression, which is usually brought on by loneliness and isolation, has skyrocketed. A few years ago most of these drugs didn't even exist; now millions of people take them regularly.

And so if you put all these facts and figures together, you end up with a rather odd picture (according to Driscoll): America is a nation of well groomed, beautiful people who sit at home alone at night with our pets watching TV shows about relationships we wish we had and taking medication for depression brought on by our loneliness!!!

You and I may not spend our evenings this way, but there's a good chance we know a lot of people who do. And there have probably been a lot of times when we've lacked the fellowship we crave. All of us struggle with this.

We're a nation of individualists.

We confuse crowds with community.

We confuse internet chat rooms with intimacy.

We settle for superficial relationships because we've never even tasted deep friendship. We don't know what we're missing.

Now, into that situation, what does the church have to offer? What does the church have to say to this situation? What can the church do?

The church offers -- or at least should offer, if she's faithful to her calling -- true community. For in the church, life begins to be lived as God really intended, so that we're not just billiard balls occasionally smacking off of one another (with only random points of contact with one another), but molecules, in which the atoms (individuals) are bound together by the attractive forces of Christ-like love.

This is Peter's point about the church here in 1 Peter 2. All the images he uses for the church are corporate.

He says we are living stones, being built into a Spiritual house (which means a house in which the Holy Spirit dwells). This house is erected on the chief cornerstone of Christ. But now we ourselves are living members of this house that God is building. Any architect will tell you that if you're going to build a stone house, every stone has to be set in its proper place in relationship with all the other stones, so that it can carry its weight and do its work in the structure.

That's what Christian community is all about -- that kind of mutual interdependence. We share a common life. We're part of the same organic structure; we're pressed together into tight knit fellowship and friendships.

Peter says we are a holy nation. In other words, we are a new Israel. Once we were not a people, but now in Christ, we've been "peopled" together. We've been made members of a common society. If the church is a new Israel, it means we have a shared culture -- a shared story, and shared symbols and rituals, a shared way of life, a shared purpose, a shared mission in and to the world, shared brotherhood -- just like Israel of old. And we ought to stand out against the backdrop of the other nations just as much as Israel did. We are to be a "contrast society," embracing an alternative way of life, refusing to blend into American individualism as a way of life because we know that it's the antithesis of the kind of sacrificial love we're called to display. We're not Americans who happen to be Christian; we're Christians who happen to be American. Our membership in and allegiance to the new Israel of the church is what gives us our fundamental identity. The church is our primary community, our first family, our true homeland.

If we're a Spiritual house and a new Israel, we must be *community builders*. This is how the stones all come together into their proper place. This is how the new Israel reveals itself as God's covenant people. Jesus said they'd recognize us as his people because we'd love one another as he loves. It is our community life that gives away our identity, that reveals us to be members of his kingdom.

Then Peter calls the church a royal priesthood. We are a community of priest-kings. This is what we're really focusing on today.

We saw last week what it means to be kings, to be the kingdom of Christ on earth. It means we're rulers, fighters, and servants -- and we do these things together, as a network, as a community, as a fellowship, as a people. You can't do these alone -- subduing the earth and building civilization, overcoming evil in the world, living lives of service -- these are not things that can be done in isolation. They require teamwork. They require shared vision and purpose. They require community. They require deep cooperation, mutuality, trust, and love. They require bonds of friendship and fellowship, humility and submission.

This morning we'll see the same is true of the priesthood we share in. Priestly tasks are communal tasks.

What does the faithful church have to offer lonely Americans? Simply put: Membership in the royal priesthood. And membership has its privileges. It means we're God's new Israel, God's new humanity. It means we can offer to people a place in God's new community, formed by the forgiveness of sins promised in the gospel.

Let's look at what it means to be God's priesthood. (Of course to do this, we have to think back to the OT Scriptures, where priesthood is defined.)

Priests had a multitude of functions in the Old Covenant and we have to ask how these "translate" over into the New Covenant. Priests did a lot of things: Priests offered animal sacrifice, they acted as mediators, they were responsible for the upkeep of the tabernacle, they were teachers and singers, they guarded God's sanctuary and so on. When you start to look at all the things priests did, it looks kind of difficult to figure out what ties all of these responsibilities together, to grasp what defines the essence of priestly ministry. But in Peter Leithart's (you knew I'd refer to him sooner or later -- it took me seven sermons or so!) study of the priesthood, he suggests that the best category to cover all these functions is simply that of "house keeper." A priest is someone who serves in the king's house, who does the king's chores. It's interesting that in the OT certain kings like David had "secular priests" ("secular" because they served the king's palace rather than God's temple). Also, advisors to the king are called "priests." They lived in the royal house and did the king's household tasks for him. The priest is a household manager for the king. He does the king's work in the king's house.

Now in the OC, the priesthood was a subset of the community. The tribe of Levi set aside to do priestly work for Israel. In the new covenant, the priesthood has been expanded and transformed to include the entire covenant body. We've all been drawn within the circle of priestly holiness. We all live within God's house; in fact, in the new covenant (as we see here in 1 Peter 2), the priesthood and temple have become identical. In the old covenant, some had holier status than others, meaning they could draw closer to God. Now, that whole graded system of holiness in the old world has been transformed. There is no more priest/non-priest distinction within the church. At baptism we're ordained into this royal priesthood, and consecrated as living stones within the temple. We have access -- we can draw near to God in Christ because in him, we've been positioned in the Most Holy Place.

We are God's temple, filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit; and we are God's priests, living and serving within that temple.

But how do we serve as priests? What do new covenant priests do?

Let's spell out a few of these roles. In the old covenant, priests guarded what was holy. Adam (the original priest) was to guard the sanctuary-garden of Eden. The Levites were to guard the tabernacle. The same word in Hebrew is used for Adam and Levites ("to do guard duty").

As priests we have to do guard duty. Aaron's family guarded the gates to the Lord's house, and we must do the same.

This is a corporate work. We guard God's holiness, God's house, through the practice of what is called church discipline. The church is the holy temple, and we guard that holiness as priests by keeping one another in line by correcting and rebuking one another in love, encouraging one another to persevere in faithfulness, and so on. We have responsibilities to one another. In the church you *are* your brother's keeper.

For example, you should train your children (yes, they're part of the priesthood too – they were ordained at baptism!) even at a young age to act as priestly guardians of one another. Instead of tattling on one another they should (to some extent) learn to police one another. As adults we should be involved in one another's lives enough that we have the freedom to intervene when it's needed, so that we correct, admonish, counsel, and forgive one another. Church discipline isn't just for church officers. We've all got to be involved because it's a priestly task. 99.9% of all so-called church discipline is simply fellow Christians holding one another accountable, asking questions, giving counsel, offering prayer. Included in our priestly ministry towards one another is declaring absolution (the forgiveness of sins). Priests made judgments about clean/unclean in the old covenant order. We have to make priestly judgments today as well.

Note that the Reformed teaching on the "priesthood of all believers" does not so much mean each man is own priest, as it means we may serve as priests on behalf of one another. Priesthood cannot function outside of community.

In the old covenant system, priests offered up incense before the Lord with the morning and evening sacrifices. Incense, of course, is a symbol of prayer arising before God's throne (Ps. 141:2; Rev. 8:1-5). Aside from whether or not we actually burn incense, this image of incense must be a reality in our lives. That symbol must be manifested in our lives. We must be burning the incense of prayer. We must be a praying people. It must be a ritual for us, a part of our routine, a part of our culture, a part of our core identity. Praying at certain times of the day, often with certain fixed forms, has been a habit of God's people for centuries, going back to the old covenant. This is a key way we exercise priestly ministry. Corporate prayer, especially, is essential. There's power when God's people pray together.

Another function of priests is one they are well known for. Priests offer sacrifice. Priests sacrifice before God's altar. This is probably the priestly task we're most familiar with. In the Bible, sacrifice is worship and worship is sacrifice.

In an ultimate sense, everything we do is to be sacrificial worship before the Lord. In Romans 12, Paul says this is our logical/reasonable service. Or, even our service in the *Logos*, in Christ. We are to offer

our bodies (plural) as a living sacrifice (singular). Our many sacrifices become one sacrifice. Our corporate life together in the world and in community is sacrificial. All this is based on God's mercy in Christ.

Paul says we're living sacrifices just as Peter says living stones (these are paradoxical images). We're to live lives of self-offering and self-giving. Our good works ascend as sacrificial memorials before the Lord. We offer sacrifice by dying to self, by giving ourselves away in love to one another, by pouring ourselves out on behalf of one another.

But more specifically, gathered worship is sacrificial in a special way. Everything we do in worship is sacrificial. We move from offering the sacrifices of broken hearts and contrite spirits in confession of sin, to the sacrifices of the fruit of our lips as we confess his name and give thanks, to the sacrifice of sharing tithes and alms in the offering, to the sacrifice of the Eucharist in which we join our self-offering to Christ's continual self-offering before the Father on our behalf as we partake of his body and blood in the sacrificial meal. Every component of the service corresponds to some sacrifice in the old covenant system. It's transformed, but it's still sacrificial.

From beginning to end, the liturgy is priestly sacrifice. The NT uses sacrificial language to describe each aspect of the service. The Reformers rejected Rome's theology of sacrifice in the Mass, but they did not reject the notion of liturgical sacrifice altogether.

Peter captures the liturgical core of our spiritual sacrificial service. In verse 5, he says these sacrifices are acceptable to God through Christ Jesus. We don't offer anything to God in our own name or our own worth. God wouldn't want it and doesn't need it anyway. But in Christ, in his name and worth, our works of worship have value in God's eyes. Just as a stick figure family portrait drawn by a 4 year old has no value at an art auction or in a museum or on Ebay, but is priceless in the eyes of the child's father, so our heavenly Father treasures our worship and works offered to him in Christ. He is pleased by our priestly service. The Father delights in your sacrificial worship.

Part of sacrificial service is recounting back to God all he's done for us. Peter says that God has made us a royal priesthood, in order that we might proclaim his praises. The term translated "praises" is used in the Greek OT of Isaiah and especially the Psalms to tell of God's great acts in history for his people. To proclaim his praises means to tell his stories, or really to tell *the story* of how he's delivered us and rescued us from slavery to sin and death through the death and resurrection of Christ. It is to declare his great acts of creation and redemption. This is why we say a creed together each week. The Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed are just stories, really, running from creation to resurrection, mostly focusing on the story of Jesus. It's the same with our hymns -- most hymns simply recount what God has done for us. And these things are to be *proclaimed* not mumbled through. The whole reason behind having a liturgy is so that we can all loudly and vigorously say and sing about what God has done, so that we can show our joy. We should say the creeds with conviction. We should sing with vigor and volume. We should give all we've got in worship, throwing ourselves into it, body and soul.

The result of living and worshipping this way is given in verse 12: As we live out our status as kingly priests, ruling, fighting, serving, guarding, praying, and sacrificing, the Gentiles are drawn to God as well, and join with us in glorifying his name and proclaiming his praises.

What does the church do that no other nation, or family, or institution, or community can do? Only the church is God's royal priesthood. Our calling is to live in the world as kings and priests to God, in

the world. And as we do this, as we walk worthy of the calling we've received in the gospel, we manifest the love and light of God for all to see. We offer to the world the true, that is, the truly human, community that it craves. We model human life as God intended it to be lived, the way God designed us to live in harmony with him and one another. Sin dehumanizes, but in the church you get your humanity back. The gospel re-humanizes us into kings and priests over creation and under God once again.

And most importantly, as we live this way, as God's royal priesthood, the world will see a community that bears the shape and imprint of Christ's own ministry as King and Priest – indeed as King of Kings and High Priest over all. The world will come to see a community that is cross-shaped, that is cruciform, that lives to die and dies to live. The world will see a community that gives itself away for the sake even of its enemies. The world will see a community that lives sacrificially because it lives its life in Christ.

To be a royal priesthood is to be a community of sacrificial service. In fact, that's the common denominator that ties together kingship and priesthood in one package – when you boil it down, they both come down to service, to sacrifice. The church is to live and die for the life of the world.

We're to proclaim God's praises with our lips and our lives. This is our sacrificial service as priest-kings before God.

Let us pray and thank God for making us a royal priesthood and ask him to help us to be loyal to these tasks and privileges.