

February 21, 2016

## Sojourners

### *Taste and See that the Lord is Good*

1 Peter 2:1 – 3

*So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation-- if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.*

The first verse of chapter 2 begins with 'so' or 'therefore', which means that what Peter is going to say now is predicated on some previous thought. And that thought really begins in verse 23 of chapter one: *'...since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;...therefore put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander...'* Something has happened. There's been a new birth. The characteristic of new life, born-again life, is that there is a fundamental change in the very make-up of a person. We all were born once, to grow, mature, reproduce and die, from seed that is very perishable. But this new life is imperishable – not able to die, because the seed of this new life is imperishable. And the means of this new birth is through the living and abiding Word of God.

This is tremendously important for a number of reasons. **First**, this means that being a Christian is not a matter of intellectual persuasion. That is, you cannot talk anyone into the kingdom. They have to have a birth experience. You must be born again. **Second**, this means that it is crucial that the word of God is heard. Romans 10 tells us that faith, which is the prerequisite for new birth, comes by hearing, and hearing comes by the word of God. No word – no faith; no faith – no new birth. This means that we do the preaching, God does the work. **Third**, this means, because it is not only a living word, but an abiding one, that whatever is done is lasting – forever! It is not the word-good-for-a-little-while – it is the abiding word, the remaining, continuing, lasting, enduring and permanent word. Once we are born-again, we don't have a third, fourth, fifth, birth. We are born-again once for all time. **Finally**, this means that if we are truly born-again of imperishable seed, then certain things are true of us that were not true before. It is true of those who are His children that we no longer slaves of sin, but righteousness; it is true that we are bound for heaven and not for hell; it is true that we are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ; it is true that we have a living hope and a lasting inheritance and we anticipate with joy the appearing of our Lord and Savior.

Then Peter says, 'So, therefore...' If this is the case with you, if you have been born again through a living and abiding word of God, if you have the imperishable life of God in you, and you are no longer condemned just to live a grass life that fades and withers, but you anticipate living forever with Christ in Heaven; then there are two commands here. The first is a command to put away something; the second is a command to desire something. First he says, *So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.* The word here means to lay aside, rid yourself of, renounce or take off. There are attitudes and actions that are inconsistent with this new birth. Specifically, malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander.

**Put away all malice.** Malice comes from the Latin word, *malus*, which means evil. It is holding and nourishing evil thoughts and wishes toward someone and even working to bring that evil about. It also means thinking about and plotting revenge; doing unto others double what they have done unto you. Peter is saying to put away, to renounce, all those feelings of ill-will toward others that hopes and even plans for the worst to happen to them, perhaps because of what they stand for, or what they have done to you, or to those you love. Put that away.

**Put away all deceit.** This word describes an evil plot to deceive; treachery and craftiness in planning. The plain meaning of the Greek word here is literally 'bait for fish'. Bait looks good to the fish, but the intent of the bait is to catch the fish and fry him up. Practicing deceit is wrong on two levels: the first is sooner or later people find the hook you've baited and realize they've been tricked; and secondly, deceit eventually leaves you friendless – people are always wondering if this is another one of your schemes to let you into their confidence so you can take advantage of them again.

**Put away all hypocrisy.** The word here is plural, indicating that there may be all kinds of hypocrisies that we engage in. Simply put, hypocrisy is pretending to be something you are not, and it comes from the word that described stage actors in ancient Greece, who wore masks on stage to portray their characters. So what is implied is that one goes through life with a series of masks that one wears, depending on the occasion, presenting a public persona that bears little relationship to the private one. *A rather pompous pastor was endeavoring to impress upon a class of boys the importance of living the Christian life. "Why do people call me a Christian?" the man asked. After a moment's pause, one youngster said, "Maybe it's because they don't know you."* If, when people get to know us, would they call us a Christian? Is there real evidence of new birth in our lives, or is it all a mask? The problem with hypocrisy, other than the fact that it is sin, is that you are always sweating a great deal to make sure that no one knows what you are really like. It puts a tremendous strain on your resources, and eventually it bankrupts you, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

**Put away all envy** – Shakespeare called it the '*green sickness*'. The Greek poet Horace declared that '*tyrants never invented a greater torment*'. The English poet Philip Bailey vividly described it as '*a coat [that] comes hissing from hell*.' And once again, the word here is plural, literally, *envyings*, indicating that there may be multiple occasions for this. At the core it means that you are jealous of the success someone has and not only want it for yourself, but wish to deprive them as well. Envy carries with it not only a desire to have, but a desire to harm. You're envious of what they have and want it, and at the same time you want to see them hurt in some way. Envy is characterized by never being satisfied with anything –the problem with envy is that you're never content, never able to enjoy what you have in your hand today, always looking to possess what you don't have, and resenting those who do. And it can kill you. *In ancient Greece, there were two men competing for the same prize. For the man who won the prize, a statue of his likeness was raised in his honor. But the man who lost, visited that statue under the cover of darkness every night, in desperate envy, trying to knock it over and break it in pieces. Well one night he finally succeeded – and the statue finally fell over and crushed him.* Envy is like that – it will kill you eventually

**Put away all slander.** This is the kind of conversation that speaks ill of someone to another. It is a deliberate poisoning of someone's mind against the person you dislike. It is the kind of speech that is intended to harm the reputation and status of someone else. And the amazing thing is that Peter is directing this command to believers. He's talking to people who have experienced the new birth in Christ. And yet he understands that there are attitudes and thought patterns and ways of dealing with others that dog our steps in this new life. There is a need to put some stuff away. To interrupt patterns of behavior and speech that are entirely inconsistent with the life of faith.

The first command is to put away some things – the second is to pick something up – **pick up a desire.** *Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation*'. Peter is not telling us to act like babies – he's not advocating regression – and he is not telling his readers that he considers them babies – but the command looks like this: 'See how a baby just goes after his mother's milk?– do that, with respect to the pure spiritual milk.' You might translate it like this: 'Have a desire for the things of God like a baby has a desire for milk.' One parallel to the strength of this desire is in Psalm 42: *'As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?* What Peter is trying to get across to his readers is not mainly the negative act of putting away some things, but rather the positive command to acquire something – acquire this desire – get a thirst and an appetite for God that is unquenchable.

And if you are like me, you might find it completely normal for Peter to give a command to put away all those negative things like malice and guile and hypocrisy and envy and slander – that makes sense. But how do you command desire? A command to feel yearnings we do not have, to want something so badly that we cry like babies when we don't get it? With the other thing, I can try harder – but how do I produce a demand for desire? To answer that, let me pose a series of questions: Is God all-powerful and all-knowing? We have to admit that He is. If God is all-powerful and all-knowing, does He know the limits of my strength and the depth of my desires? Again we have to say He does. Is God for me and not against me, does He want me to succeed and not fail? Romans 8 tells us emphatically that He is for us and He is not setting us up to fail. So if God is all-powerful and all-knowing, He knows the limits of my strength and the depth of my desires, and He is for me and not against me, He wants me to succeed and not fail, **would He then give me a command He knows I can not and will not keep?** And we must answer no, He would not.

So what do we do? How do we respond to the clear command to develop a desire for the pure spiritual milk? You know, it's interesting, when you're a new believer, how much sense this verse makes. There you are like a newborn baby, sucking up all the spiritual milk you can. Everything is a revelation. Everything is a source of nourishment. The word of God is alive, your prayers are fervent, the presence of God is so near and real and you can't wait to talk to someone about this God who saved you. All your desires are wrapped up in wanting more of God. You literally feel like that deer panting for flowing streams of water. You can't get enough. And you have to ask yourself, 'How did that happen? How did I go from someone who wanted nothing to do with God to someone whose days are wasted without Him?'

The answer is right there in the text. *if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good*. Where was it that you first tasted that the Lord is good? Wasn't it in the gospel? When the light of the gospel broke in on your heart, didn't you finally begin to understand the immense goodness of God? Didn't the word of the gospel begin to generate this deep desire for God in you? You see Peter is so consistent here. He tells us that our being born again was by means of the living and abiding word of God. And this new birth that was born by the word is sustained by the word. Over the transient, temporary, fragile exile life we live here on earth flies the banner of God's eternal word. And His word tells us over and over that He is good. *Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!* You see, Peter says, 'You've tasted His goodness. You've experienced His kindness. You know that He is more satisfying than the small, temporary jolt of pleasure we get from other things.'

**Therefore**, put away all those competing desires that choke out the desire for God. Put away the desire for malice and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander. And nurture a desire for the things of God like a baby has a desire for milk. You see the gospel is the means to new life, and it is the means to sustain that life. You don't get away from the gospel. If you are born again, what you have in your being as the imperishable word of God is able to produce not only the will to put aside all the negative things of the old man, but also to get that deep desire for the pure spiritual milk. The word which birthed you is the means through which you will grow to maturity. You don't get born and then you're on your own. As you drink in the life-giving, life-sustaining milk of the gospel – spontaneously you develop a deeper desire for more.

Sometimes we act like God has left us on our own to live up to the demands we find in Scripture. But He would never do that. Remember what Peter has been saying in chapter one: *God has chosen you. God has caused you to be born again to a living hope. God is holding for you an imperishable, undefiled and unfading inheritance. God is protecting you through faith so that you won't ultimately fall away through unbelief. God is carefully adjusting the fires of suffering to refine and purify your faith.* So why would we think now that He would leave it up to us to, by sheer effort of human will, to put aside malice and envy and all that stuff, and create a desire we do not naturally possess? We need to realize that He is the source of our strength and will power – He is the creator and sustainer of this longing for the pure spiritual milk. It is to Him we must go for both. **If God says to put aside malice and guile and hypocrisy and envy and slander – and if God says that we must desire when we don't desire – then He must know something we don't – He must have some power that we do not – there must be a way.**

The Bible is full of these God-only commands: *be joyful, keep on rejoicing, don't be anxious, be full of hope, be fervent in your service, be burning in your worship of God*, and so on. These are things only God can supply – because quite frankly we always run out of steam, and if you run out of steam, that is a good indication that you have been doing it, and God has been waiting for you to quit doing it on your own and come to Him. If He has commanded it, it must be possible. Don't listen to your experience that tells you been there, done that, didn't work. It didn't work because you didn't let God work. You thought if you just tried a little harder, worked up a little more sweat, dug a little deeper, you could get results. But on your own you are just grass, and grass withers. What we need is to pray as Augustine prayed as he battled the fires of lust and illicit desire, ***'O love that ever burns and is never quenched! O Charity, my God, enkindle me! You command self-control. Grant what You command and command what You will!'*** And He has commanded not only that we put aside those God-dishonoring desires, but that we get the desire for the pure spiritual milk.

The word Peter uses for spiritual here is a word that is difficult to translate. Some translations substitute 'word' for spiritual, as in the NASB – 'as newborn babes long for the pure milk of the word', rather than the 'pure spiritual milk'. But while it is nothing less than the pure word of God, it is also much more.

It is more than mere Bible intake. Pure spiritual milk here refers to the entirety of the new birth reality. Before you embraced the gospel, malice, deceit, envy, hypocrisy and slander were normal ways of dealing with life. You see, Peter is saying, 'Put away those impure desires that are incompatible with this new birth; and develop the pure desires that come with regeneration. And it's those desires that come with the new birth by the word of God. There's a brand of spiritual milk that will choke you and kill you – don't nurture the desire for that. Nurture the desire for the pure spiritual milk that will grow you.' It begins with the pure word, nothing added, nothing subtracted. Desire that pure word, not the watered down word, not the word that suits our tastes, or the word that fits our lifestyle, or the word that is popular for the moment, but the pure unmixed word of God. And instead of malice, desire kindness. Instead of deceit, desire honesty. Instead of hypocrisy, desire sincerity. Instead of envy, desire love. And instead of speaking slander, desire to speak blessing. This is the pure spiritual milk Peter is talking about.

That means that I refuse to follow my natural inclinations to exact revenge or have my own way. I don't buy into what is trendy, or worldly, or popular, or convenient. It means I won't settle for a cheap imitation of the real thing. I will not seek to lower God's standard, twist God's will, rewrite God's Word, or accept what God hates. In a world that settles for compromise, I will settle for nothing less than God Himself. Confronted by lies, I will speak the truth. Bombarded by hopelessness, I will hope in God. Where I am tempted to take revenge, I will let kindness rule the day. Pressured to bend the truth, I will be unflinchingly honest. Where I'm enticed to slander, I will bless instead of curse. Long for the pure spiritual milk. Let a desire for the things of God consume you.

Because Peter says this is how you grow. *'...long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.* New birth implies growth. There is nothing more pathetic than a Christian who does not grow. We are meant to grow up. Notice he says, **'grow up into salvation'**. Salvation is not a Cinderella experience where your fairy godmother waves her wand and suddenly you are totally transformed and you never battle evil desires again. On the one hand, salvation is the immediate rescue from the power of sin and the wrath of God. And on the other hand, it is a lifelong process as our mind, emotions and will are daily transformed and conformed to the image of Christ. We hear Peter talking to Christians and saying, 'Stop giving in to malice and deceit and envy and all that stuff – quench the desire to slander and backbite and feed the desire for the things of God, and grow up!'

Peter is really speaking to our experience as believers. When we first taste the goodness of God in the gospel, our appetite for Him seems insatiable. We can't get enough. Things seem so easy and simple. We suck in the pure spiritual milk like babies do a bottle. But then things happen. Life seems to get harder and more complicated as God begins to deal with our natural dispositions. God allows trouble into our live and we find ourselves battling these evil desires like malice and envy and deceit. We turn into hypocrites who project this mask of spiritual life, while underneath we're spiritually dead. We've lost our appetite for the things of God and we're going through the motions. And we get to the point sometimes that we think, 'Was any of this real? Did I ever experience God? Am I even a Christian?'

Peter is addressing these believers, like many of us, who seem to be stuck. They've been experiencing pressure and trouble and suffering for their faith and they're discouraged. The trouble in their lives has caused them to lose perspective and hope. They've taken their focus off God and His goodness and they've begun thinking the worst of others and entertaining thoughts of revenge. Their difficulties have seduced them into dishonesty and hypocrisy; the green sickness has infected their thoughts and they've begun speaking evil about each other. And Peter doesn't say 'You must be born again.' They have been born again. Peter says 'You need to grow up! You've lost your passion and appetite for God because you haven't been feeding on the kind of stuff that will generate an appetite for Him. Instead of white-hot zeal, you're a lukewarm cup of tea. You've got to grow up. Be like a baby in your appetite, but don't be a baby in your practice'.

How do we do that? How do we grow? Peter says it begins with, and is sustained by, the living and eternal word of God. And he says 'You've tasted all the goodness of God in His word. That is what has brought you to this point. You need to keep on tasting it. You have to turn it over on the palate of your heart. You have to let it melt your heart. You have to immerse yourself in it, swim in the warm oceans of His word. You have to let the truth that comes to you invade your soul and feed on it. Let it lead you to prayer and meditation over it. You have to digest it, and you have to apply it. You have to make it part of your thinking and behavior.

Listen to the words of the prophet Jeremiah: *Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by Your name, O LORD, God of hosts.* Jeremiah 15:16 Listen to the psalmist: *How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!* Psalm 119:103 *'...the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.* We need to taste the goodness of God in His word. Putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander; deeply desiring the pure spiritual milk and growing in grace in respect to salvation; all of that is only possible *'if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.*

Romans 2:4 says that it is His goodness, more precisely, His kindness that leads us to repentance. There is a taste to the Lord's kindness that the proud and self-sufficient and unrepentant will never know. *'O taste and see that the Lord is good!'* The surest test of the quality of any supposed change will be found in the permanent effect it has on our living. Have you tasted the goodness of the Lord? Then put aside all those things that characterized your former way of life. Has your heart been led to repentance and brokenness over your sin and rebellion? Then desire deeply the pure, spiritual milk. Drink in and digest the unadulterated word of God and grow in respect to salvation.

If you have never been born again to a living hope, I want to invite you to taste the kindness of God this morning. In His kindness, God sent His only Son to die in your place on the cross, to live the life you should have lived, and die the death you should have died. And God raised Him in resurrection power so that you might be born again to a living hope. The word of faith has gone out, the Holy Spirit is speaking to you, let Him lead you to repentance and respond in faith to this word. For you who have been born again, let this word be an encouragement and comfort in your battles against sin and self, and grab hold of His living word this morning and begin putting aside all those things that keep you from joy and begin to deeply desire the pure, soul-satisfying, sin-killing word of God.

*Our gracious heavenly Father,*

*Let us taste Your kindness this morning. Come Holy Spirit and sweep over our souls; lead us to repentance and deliver us from the soul-destroying passions and thoughts to which we fall prey. Let Your word be precious and powerful to us. Set a deep desire in our hearts for your living word; and incline our hearts to this word and break our bondage to other things. Pierce through our souls and waken spiritual life. Confirm in us the foundation of our faith and make us real and genuine; and may nothing in our lives be disconnected from You. Let us taste the crucified and risen Christ who came that dead and sinful men might be raised to new life, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus, Amen.*