*Longing for the Word*

1 Peter 2:1-3

12/4/22

Although we start a new chapter today, Peter’s argument continues unbroken. Peter has been focusing on the gospel’s power to transform lives. Central to that process is the word of God, where the message is contained. Last week, we focused on how Scripture is the means the Spirit uses to work the miracle of the new birth. This week, we see that they are equally important to our continued growth after conversion.

Our text is tied to the previous verses by the word, *therefore.* The message of salvation had been preached to and received by Peter’s readers. Because of their belief, he now instructs them on Christian conduct. 1 Peter is all about how we live as God’s people in a world that is no longer our home. We are aliens and sojourners in it. So Peter has been issuing a series of commands concerning Christian conduct. Today’s command focuses on pursuing God through His word. *We are to seek the word of God so that we may grow in our relationship with Him.* There are four observations I want to make about this.

First, pursuing God through His word requires us to lay aside sin. In 1:22, we were told that belief in the gospel purifies our souls. The sin that used to enslave us has been dealt with by Christ. Having been purified from sin, we are then compelled to deal with the ongoing expression of sin in our lives. Here in 2:1, this process is described as putting aside sin. The word translated *putting aside* was commonly used to describe the removal of a garment. In the same way we remove a dirty shirt, we are to remove the sin that corrupts us.

Paul uses a similar expression in Col. 3:9-10 when he describes believers as having *laid aside the old self with its evil practices and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.* Salvation brings transformation. We used to be dead towards God and alive to sin. Yet now, we are to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God. Now, the corruption of our flesh makes that a work in progress as we labor to lay aside sin so that we can live for God.

Obviously, all sin is to be put aside; yet Peter lists 5 specific sins that hinder the expression of love focused on in the context. We purified our souls *for a sincere love of the brethren.* Therefore, we are to put aside these sins because they will keep us from fervently loving one another from the heart.

The first sin listed is *malice.* This sin can be seen as the corrupted tree that produces the rotten fruit of the other sins in the list. **Malice is a mean-spirited or vicious attitude or disposition**. Malice causes you to look at a fellow believer and desire their demise. Rather than encouraging and building that person up, you work to tear them down, cause them to stumble, or shame in the eyes of others. Although we would never express this purposefully or even realize that this is what our malice was doing, but unchecked malice towards someone causes you to subvert their faith. This sin hurts everyone…the object of our malice, the unity and reputation of the church, and ultimately the spiritual vitality of the one harboring malice in their heart.

Second, we are to put aside all deceit. **Deceit is taking advantage of someone through craft and underhanded methods.** The Scriptures tell us that Satan deceived Eve into eating the forbidden fruit. He convinced her that it was a good thing to eat it, rather than a bad thing. He did this through giving partial truths, distorting God’s word, and casting doubt over God’s goodness. He took advantage of her innocence through manipulation and underhanded means.

Sadly, there are people in churches who prey on weak individuals whom they can manipulate into doing their bidding. They feed these weak Christians the information they want them to have and withhold the information they do not want them to have, using them as pawns to create disunity in the church. Yet their deception does not go unnoticed by God, and eventually it will be evident to the church, usually only after they have caused a split. I could fill the rest of our sermon time giving illustrations of ways I have seen church people purposefully deceive others for personal gain. Every time the gospel’s reputation was hurt, and the unity of the church was strained if not all together broken. It is tragic to watch.

Thirdly, we are told to put aside hypocrisy. Hypocrisy was originally used to describe an actor playing a part in a play. Obviously, their role was not who they truly were as a person, but show they put on for the benefit of others. The term was adopted by the church to describe those whose faith is an act, while underneath they are very different than the airs they put on. Hypocrisy is concerned, not with doing what pleases God, but what gains the approval of men. It is to be two-faced, acting one way in one context, while acting differently in another context. A hypocrite is a chameleon, adapting to whatever environment they find themselves in. Such duplicity demonstrates a lack of biblical conviction and subverts unity.

Fourthly, we are told to put aside all envy. **Envy is an inappropriate desire for someone else’s circumstances.** Rather than being content with the circumstances God has given, an envious person looks at someone else, and desires the life God has given them. This attitude leads to inappropriate actions, as they undermine relationships and subvert joy in the church.

I saw this illustrated both negatively and positively in my former ministry context. The church had many young families; therefore, we were enjoying something of a baby boom in the church. But one young couple was struggling with infertility. Every time someone got pregnant, the wife refused to be happy for them and would often treat them poorly. When pregnancies were announced at church, she would make such a show out of her hurt that it robbed the church of the joy of celebrating the gift of a child with the happy couple. We all were relieved when she finally got pregnant. On the flip side, there was another woman in the church who struggled with infertility, which is a hard path to walk. Although she and her husband struggled with it, she truly rejoiced when other became pregnant. She was happy they did not experience her pain, and she refused to be envious of their life. In doing this, she modeled godliness; and when she finally became pregnant, the church family experienced genuine joy in God’s kindness to this godly couple. Envy has no place among God’s people, for at its base is a lack of contentment with God for His ordering of our lives. Envy disrupts our relationship with God and his people.

Finally, we are to put aside all slander. **Slander is speaking ill of another**. It is sharing information designed to tear an individual down. It is murder with the mouth; it is malice expressed verbally by spreading information designed to undoing someone. Over the season of covid, this happened a lot. Churches or individuals who did not think ‘properly’ about the issues were considered ungodly and were open to vial criticism. Rather than making peace, allowing love to cover a multitude of sins, and maintaining a gracious attitude towards those who differed in conviction, we often verbally castigated anyone who didn’t think just like us. Rather than encouraging one another and building each other up, slander causes us to tear one another down. Rightly did James describe the tongue as *a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.* Knowing this, we are to lay aside slander like a dirty garment.

If we are to thrive in our relationship with God and sincerely love one another from the heart, we must lay aside sin. I love John Owen’s quote *be killing sin, or it will be killing you.* Yet this is only half the equation. The Christian life is much more than ridding ourselves of sin. Victory over sin and temptation has more to do with what we pursue than what we avoid. We are laying aside sin because a new desire has arisen in us. That new desire is for the word of God.

This brings us to our second observation. Remember that every paragraph in 1 Peter is built around one or more commands. The command of this paragraph is found in vs. 2. We are to long for the pure milk of the word. The longing here is a craving that can only be satisfied by God’s word. One of my high school teachers was a heavy smoker. Once he took a small group of us on a school trip. By the time we reached our destination, he could not get out of the van and light a cigarette quick enough. It became his passion and affected his mood. This illustrates the believer’s need for God’s word. We are to be like a new-born baby longing for its mother’s milk. It does not matter what time it is; once the baby decides it is hungry, nothing will satisfy it other than their mother’s milk. Peter says our desire for God’s word should look like that.

The Scriptures are the believer’s spiritual nourishment. As we read and meditate on it, we commune with God. The Bible tells us who God is and how He acts. It describes His love and commitment to His people, and what He desires for His people to be and do. It is His love letter written to us. In the same way we delight in a special note received from our lover, we should delight in God’s word. It is where we go for instruction, encouragement, correction, and everything else we need to thrive as God’s people. We do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. We should desire the pure word of God with the same passion that a newborn baby has for its mother’s milk.

Not only does a baby long for its mother’s milk, but milk is the only suitable food for it. A newborn cannot eat a steak. They cannot process it. Milk is the only appropriate food. Similarly, the pure, undiminished, unedited word of God is the only spiritual food for the believer. The bible is not a source of spiritual nourishment. It is the source, and the only source.

Now, for the desire expressed here to translate into practice, we must discipline ourselves for the purpose. Daily bible study and prayer are habits that require effort to establish and maintain. If you are not in the habit of doing them, then here are some quick tips to help you translate the desire into action. 1) pick a consistent time and place. Rhythm and routine are essential to establishing habits. 2) develop a plan with clear goals you can measure. Either develop reading schedule for yourself or find one that someone else has come up with. Many bibles include a reading plan you can follow. What the plan is, is not the point. The point is to intentionally feed on God’s word. Finally, establish accountability with someone who can encourage you as you learn the discipline. The Bible is the spiritual bread our souls need to grow in our relationship with God. We must learn to feed on its unchanging truths.

Next, notice the goal of pursuing God through His word: it is to grow in the practice of our faith. We long for the word *so that you may grow in respect to salvation.* The goal of the believer is to draw as near to God as possible, to enjoy unhindered fellowship with Him and to be used by Him to advance His purposes for His glory. These desires are what drive us away from sinful desires into the word of God.

Throughout this study, I have tried to emphasize the dual agents of our spiritual growth. It is something we must engage in and take responsibility for; yet ultimately it is God at work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. So what we are trying to do by laying aside sin and pursuing God through His word, is engage in the activities God uses to transform us into the image of Christ. The primary means He uses is His word and prayer.

John Owen, the famous 16th century theologian and pastor gave a helpful illustration of God and man’s joint activity in sanctification in his book *Indwelling Sin in Believers.* He describes God’s grace as an inexhaustible spring flowing from God to His people. Satan attempts to clog the free flow of God’s grace in the believer’s life through sin, distraction, and worldly-mindedness. The believer’s job is to keep the streams of God’s grace freely flowing in their lives by kill sin and cultivating the spiritual disciplines. By doing this, they give God the freedom to transform them from who they were into who He intends for us to be in Christ.

So the goal of our pursuit of God’s word is to grow in the practice of our faith. Having received life from Christ, we want to express that life well in our daily lives. That is a learned skill acquired over time. Christ had to learn obedience as He faced different circumstances in life. We too must learn obedience as we sojourn on earth.

Finally, longing for the pure milk of the word is the normal experience of Christians. In vs. 3 we see the conditional statement *if you have tasted of the kindness of the Lord.* This statement continues the feeding metaphor. We first taste God’s kindness in salvation. Then, having tasted of God’s grace, we desire more of it. The more we have it, the more we want it. We become like Moses, who saw great displays of God’s glory. Yet he was not satisfied, so he still asked for God to show him the fullness of His glory. Although he could not see all God’s glory and live, God granted his request by giving him even greater glimpses of His glory. Tasting of God’s kindness creates a craving for more. That craving is only satisfied through communion with God through time spent in His word and prayer

The *if* clause demands self-evaluation. It is a good question for us to ask *have I tasted of the kindness of God expressed in salvation?*  The one who daily feeds on God’s word says with confidence *yes*. They do not say this because of any merit found within them. Rather, they see how the gospel has changed them. They can say with John Newton: two things I know: I am a great sinner, and Christ is a great Savior.

When a saint who has drifted away from God through neglect of His word and prayer or the persistent engagement in sin, this brings conviction. When they ask *have I tasted of the kindness of God,* they still say yes. They look back on times when they knew the joy of their salvation. Yet their present neglect of their relationship with God has robbed them of that joy. If that is you, what do you do? Ask God’s forgiveness and lean into the practices that will return you to the daily experience of God’s kindness. He is waiting for you, just as the father waited for the prodigal son to return, that he might embrace him again.

Finally, if you have never tasted the kindness of God in salvation, this statement serves as a gracious call to turn from your sin to trust in Christ. You cannot make yourself acceptable to God, for you are thoroughly and completely corrupted by sin. The human heart is desperately wicked and deceitful above all things. Yet God will give you a new heart, if you will stop trying to earn your way to God and simply trust what Christ has done in your place. When you ask God’s forgiveness, He will give you a new heart with new desires. You will taste God’s kindness; and once you know it, you will know joy and peace unlike anything the world can provide.