

Introduction

Several years ago Jim used an illustration that stuck with us. It was a bit of a trick question: when you fill your glass and bump it, what spills out? It's a simple question, really. If you bump your glass and it spills, what comes out is whatever you put in it. The point was clear: what you fill your life with is what comes out of your "glass" when life gets rough and bumps it. Is it anger? That's because you filled it with anger. Is it joy? That's because you filled it with joy.

About 300BC Aristotle wrote that a true void cannot exist in nature. This later came to be phrased differently, while still being attributed to Aristotle: *nature abhors a vacuum*. Vacuums cannot exist naturally because other pressures from other things will—naturally—fill that void. But there are vacuums. You can create a limited vacuum with that household tool for cleaning carpet, known, obviously enough, as a *vacuum*.

So another question is sometimes asked: if you were inside the most advanced laboratory filled with the latest in scientific equipment, how would you remove all the air from inside a glass beaker? There are a few ways to remove the air from inside a glass beaker. You could put the beaker in a vacuum chamber and evacuate the chamber. You could use a diffusion pump or a turbomolecular pump. A turbomolecular pump is very effective, but even a tiny speck of dust can wreck it.

You could cool the air until it liquefies; then it's no longer "air" but a liquid. You could also heat the air so that it expands and when it rushes out of the beaker you could quickly seal the beaker. Those are options. The simplest and most effective way to remove the air from a beaker, however, doesn't require a high-tech lab with expensive equipment. If you want to remove the air, *just fill it with water*.

This maxim, that nature abhors a vacuum, is a spiritual principle, too. In Matthew 12 Jesus said when an unclean spirit is cast out of a person it wanders around and then "brings with it seven others spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first" (Mt 12:45). *Supernature* abhors a vacuum. You have to fill that space with something, namely, with Jesus. The Lord can occupy any space. If you fill yourself with him there is no room for that unclean spirit and its seven buddies.

In our text today, Peter explains how to avoid that spiritual vacuum. The answer really is far more simple than we might expect. We're in 1 Peter 2.

¹ Pet 2:1 So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. ² Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

1 Peter 2:1–3

Response

Peter continues his exhortation. He's writing to believers in Pontus and Galatia and Capadocia and Asia and Bithynia because they are suffering for their faithfulness to Jesus. No one really cared that they worshiped Jesus; the problem for others is worshiping Jesus necessarily precludes worshiping any other god or goddess. This was seen as being a bad citizen. The society essentially declared, "Worship whatever god you choose, but *also* worship the gods we worship".

Their refusal to bow to those same idols made them strange and different from others, and the culture couldn't understand that refusal. Friends and business partners began to withdraw from them and began speaking evil of them to the others. There was a cost to following Jesus. While the opposition had not yet risen to the level of physical harm, these believers were suffering for their faith in Jesus.

Peter has reminded them that worship is the basis for all of human life. God is worthy of worship regardless of their present circumstances. Whatever their circumstances, they aren't eternal. Their life in Christ is eternal. The inheritance that is coming is eternal. God has caused them to be born again, which results in that inheritance. It is their inheritance because God has given it to them and God is guarding it so that no one can take it from them.

Out of this flows Peter's instructions for their lives. They are to set their hope fully on the grace that will be revealed when the Lord comes again. They are to be holy in all their conduct. They are to love one another earnestly. In our text he continues the new birth analogy.

The simple truth is God is the cause of their life in Christ. They have been born again because God caused them to be born again. They are not born again as single children, but as brothers and sisters of a vast family, complete with all the responsibilities toward siblings.

This idea of God's actions in their salvation is essential. They cannot remain faithful to the Lord apart from God's active, ongoing work in their lives. As Peter said at the end of chapter 1, new life is brought into being by God's creative word. The same voice that said, "Let their be light" is the voice that called forth their new birth. I love how Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 4.

^{2 Cor 4:6} For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:6

Paul is saying essentially the same thing. We didn't turn on a light switch. We didn't step out of the shadow and into the light. We were in darkness, then God spoke and light shone in our hearts that gives the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. At the end of chapter 1 Peter said the word of the Lord remains forever and this word *is the good news that was preached to you*. This word, this light that shines in us, is the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

The gospel isn't the good news that we're saved. The gospel is the good news that *Jesus saves*. The good news is news of Jesus. We receive this news gladly in faith because God

so works in us that he brings about the response of faith. God causes us to be born again and God guards us through faith for our salvation. Peter's audience are recipients of what God has done in Christ through his Spirit. They are not the cause of it. God's creative word—Jesus!—brought about their salvation.

Setting their hope on the grace that will be brought when Jesus returns is a response to what God has done. Being holy in all their conduct is a response to what God has done. Loving one another earnestly is a response to what God has done. Now Peter is going to flesh out in more detail what loving one another means.

So Put Away

In verse 1 he writes, "So put away" and then lists several vices. The real command is in the next verse. This instruction is explanatory. It's more like "as you are *putting away* these things", do this other thing.

First he says malice. Malice is ill-will toward others. Remember the context: love one another earnestly. There is no place in love for malice toward others. Ill-will is never loving. Ever. It is the opposite of love. Love seeks what is in the other's best interest; malice seeks what is in their worst interest. Malice rejoices when others struggle and experience hardship. Loving one another earnestly requires that this be put away.

Then he says to put away all deceit and hypocrisy. The idea of deceit is that of ulterior motives. The context for this is life in their churches. To speak or to act with ulterior motives is to deceive. If you withhold information that was necessary to understand what you said, you have deceived. You don't have to share *everything*, but if you share something and intentionally leave out the part that would affect how people understand what you did say, that is deceit. Think of the person who saw a man hugging a woman at a restaurant and his wife wasn't with him. If you leave out the fact the woman was his sister, you're being very deceptive. This is the idea.

Hypocrisy is similar. Whereas deceit centers around what you say or don't say, hypocrisy is lying with your behavior. You act in such a way that creates an impression that isn't true. This is less obvious than deceit, but it's just as deadly to Christian community.

Peter adds envy. Whereas malice is ill-will in general, envy is ill-will toward someone who has something you want. The thing becomes far more important than the person. This is different from coveting. Coveting focuses on the thing you want; envy is malice toward the person who has the thing you want.

This inevitably leads to slander, which is speaking ill—wrongfully—of the person who has what you want. Because of your envy, you have ill-will toward a person and so you spread gossip about him, slandering his character.

I know a man who wanted to work for a particular company in a particular position. A friend of his was hired by that company, but for a different role. It wasn't that they both applied for the Assistant to the Regional Manager position; only one could get that job. The man wanted to work for that particular company in a completely different department. Because of his envy he began slandering that man to their mutual friend group, causing some of them to turn against him though he himself had done nothing wrong.

This is what envy leads to. This is what all these vices lead to. Peter says to put them away precisely because each of these vices is utterly destructive to building Christian

community. Malice toward your fellow believer is not loving one another earnestly. Deceit is not loving one another earnestly. Hypocrisy is not loving one another earnestly. Envy is not loving one another earnestly. Slander is not loving one another earnestly. Not only are these not constructive for building Christian community, they are quite *destructive*.

These things must not exist in the church! Notice carefully Peter does not say to stop worshiping the gods they once worshiped. He assumes they're not offering sacrifices to the various deities worshiped by those around them. Their former manner of life, however, sticks around. They must be actively putting away *these things* because they are *struggling* with these things.

When I was a kid, Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign was in full swing. We were told, again and again, to just say "No" to drugs. I was not the target audience for this. I had *zero* interest in drugs. My struggles lay elsewhere, and there was no national campaign to help with that. Peter is aware of those to whom he is writing, and it's clear they are struggling—at least on some level—with these things. They must be putting these things away, *actively*.

Like Newborn Infants

Peter continues his new birth / imperishable seed metaphor. He gets to his actual command in verse 2: like newborn infants, they must long for the pure spiritual milk. He's not saying they should be childish or childlike. In the way a newborn infant longs for her mother's milk, so they must long for pure spiritual milk.

Elsewhere in Scripture milk is used as a criticism, as indicating spiritual immaturity. The author of Hebrews, for example, criticizes his recipients for still needing milk when they should be eating solid food. In 1 Corinthians Paul criticized them for not being ready for solid food. Again, that's not what Peter is indicating. His emphasis is not on what is being eaten, but on the craving for it.

In the way a newborn infant craves mama's milk, so they must crave pure spiritual milk. We have to look past the actual words to see the real meaning. Moms, you know what he's talking about. Your baby cries so you change her diaper, but that's not it. You burp her, but that's not it. You offer a little toy, but that's not it. You can whisper sweet words in her ear and sing to her, but when your baby is craving milk, only milk will satisfy her. Peter is pointing them to *desire*, not their menu.

The menu is important, though. They must long for the *pure spiritual milk*! What does he mean? Again, he's continuing this new birth metaphor. Remember how he opened his letter. God has caused them to be born again. That is, the cause of their spiritual life in Christ is the Lord's action. He also said God is guarding them through faith. That is, not only is he the cause of their spiritual life, he is the sustainer of their spiritual life. That's what Peter is saying.

In the same way newborn infants long for that which will nourish and sustain them—something they cannot provide for themselves—so they must long for that which will nourish and sustain them spiritually. This, just like the newborn infants, is not something they can provide for themselves. We remain as helpless as we were when God caused us to be born again.

Clearly this doesn't mean we just sit there, eating, sleeping, and pooping like a newborn infant! Otherwise Peter's instructions are pointless. You can tell my grandson Rhys to wash the dishes and take out the trash all you want and he'll just smile at you and be as cute as a grandkid can be, but those dishes ain't gettin' washed! The point is infants cannot sustain themselves. They require constant care. So do we.

It's not about *being* like a baby; it's about *longing and craving* like a baby. An infant cries when hungry because that is how an infant communicates. An infant knows he needs something he cannot provide himself so he cries out to the one who can. In the case of a believer, what is it he or she longs for? What is this "pure spiritual milk" we must cry out for like a newborn infant?

To be quite honest, it's complicated. There is significant debate in the scholarship because the underlying word translated "spiritual" is related to the word for "word". This leads some scholars today to think Peter is telling his readers to long for *Scripture*, as if Peter is saying, "Read your Bible and pray every day and you'll grow, grow, *grow*".

You should read your Bible and pray every day, but I don't think that's what Peter is saying here. The context suggests otherwise. First, the milk is pure. That is, it is unmixed, or uncontaminated in any way. The contrast isn't with milk that is mixed or contaminated in some way. That *could* refer to Scripture, for Scripture is uncontaminated, but again, Peter is not urging them to avoid contaminated Scripture.

I don't want to get bogged down in the technicalities here. Peter is quoting from the Greek version of Psalm 34: "Taste and see that the Lord is good". In verse 3 he says, "if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good". That's a conditional statement that doesn't question whether they have, in fact, tasted that the Lord is good, but rather draws the inference: *because you have tasted*, or *since you have tasted that the Lord is good*.

There *is* a connection to the word of God, but what is that word? This is where many want to insert the written Word—Scripture. However, at the end of chapter 1 Peter says, citing Isaiah 40, *the word of the Lord remains forever*. What is that word? Does he mean Scripture proper? No; he tells us what that word is:

¹ Pet 1:25 but the word of the Lord remains forever.

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

1 Peter 1:25

Peter tells his readers they must, like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, and that milk is the good news of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. They must long for the gospel!

Desire

Peter's main thrust here is that as they actively eliminate community-destroying vices from their lives, on account of having been born again and being guarded through faith. They must long for that which sustains their lives. They must crave spiritual sustenance and spiritual nourishment. That nourishment is the Lord Jesus.

Too often we think of "the gospel" as a thing we tell non-Christians, as if the good news that was preached to us can be limited or restricted in some sense. Listen: the gospel is for

Christians, too! Peter is telling us to desire this, to long for it, to *crave* the pure spiritual milk!

The idea isn't simply to long for it, to have a strong desire for it. They are to desire it and to *indulge* in it! Newborn infants long for mama's milk and newborn infants satisfy themselves with it.

Far too often we think of our desires as being too strong. That's not the problem. The problem is our desires are often misplaced. We desire the wrong things—things that can never satisfy! And even then, our desire for them isn't too strong; our desire for things that can never satisfy is desire that is too weak. CS Lewis put it so very well.

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

C. S. Lewis, "Weight of Glory"

He says the real problem is that we're so easily satisfied playing in a mud puddle in the alley when God offers us his beachfront Airbnb! We're so amused and entertained by mud puddles that we don't even look up to see what he's offering us! It isn't that we desire the mud; it's that we're willing to be satisfied playing in the mud.

I remember reading John Piper's seashells story years ago. It was back in the year 2000. He spoke to 40,000 college students at the fourth Passion Conference. I wasn't there but he later put the story in his book "Don't Waste Your Life". In that book he wrote this:

I will tell you what a tragedy is. I will show you how to waste your life. Consider a story from the February 1998 edition of Reader's Digest, which tells about a couple who "took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30 foot trawler, play softball, and collect shells".

At first, when I read it I thought it might be a joke. A spoof on the American Dream. But it wasn't. Tragically, this was the dream: Come to the end of your life—your one and only precious, God-given life—and let the last great work of your life, before you give an account to your Creator, be this: playing softball and collecting shells.

Picture them before Christ at the great day of judgment: "Look, Lord. See my shells." That is a tragedy. And people today are spending billions of dollars to persuade you to embrace that tragic dream. Over against that, I put my protest: Don't buy it. Don't waste your life."

John Piper, "Don't Waste Your Life", pp. 45–46

The problem wasn't that they loved playing softball or collecting shells. The problem was they were satisfied with this being their life's pursuit. This would be their legacy: a few scars from sliding into second base and a box of old sea shells. Their problem wasn't that they desired too much; their problem was that they desired so little.

Peter is urging them to have the greatest desire for the thing that is most desirable. He wants them to crave something, to spend their lives pursuing that thing they crave. It isn't that we should desire less, but that we should desire *more*.

In his book "God is the Gospel", John Piper asks the question if you could have heaven, with no illness, with all your friends, with all the food you enjoy, with all the activities you enjoy, with all the natural beauty in the world, all the pleasures you've experienced, with no conflict or natural disasters, could you be satisfied with such a heaven, if Christ were not there? If you could have literally everything you want without Jesus, would you be satisfied with that? He responds to this strongly.

Christ did not die to forgive sinners who go on treasuring anything above seeing and savoring God. And people who would be happy in heaven if Christ were not there, will not be there. The gospel is not a way to get people to heaven; it is a way to get people to God. It's a way of overcoming every obstacle to everlasting joy in God. If we don't want God above all things, we have not been converted by the gospel.

John Piper, "God is the Gospel"

Do you see why Peter roots all of his instructions, all of his encouragement, all of his challenges, all of his teaching in these letters in doxology? "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ". God is worthy of praise regardless of your present circumstances! This is true because regardless of your present circumstances through faith God is ever present and ever active in your life, giving himself to you, again and again. The good news, the very word of the Lord that remains forever, is God himself, given freely to his people as an everlasting inheritance.

Application

Far too many preachers out there proclaim a gospel of *stuff*. They claim that if you follow Jesus you will be blessed and receive riches and prosperity and favor and good health. It's usually in conjunction with a sacrificial gift to the preacher's Bentley fund—I mean, a *seed of faith* in supporting the mission of his church. If we're honest, deep down we believe a gospel of *stuff*. We really think that because we do the right thing and live a certain way then our lives really ought to have fewer problems. We would never be so crass as to *say* this—not out loud, at least, but we feel it.

And sometimes, deep down, we know we might be a little happier if we could just get a little more of God's *stuff*. Yeah, yeah, God is great and all, but his *stuff*? At its core, this is what these vices are, a yearning for something more, while also something far less. Malice and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander all are a yearning for something more than we have, and far less than God offers us. The problem isn't that we desire them; the problem is that we could be satisfied with them.

When a church yearns for the Lord, there is no room for malice or deceit or hypocrisy or envy or slander. When a church craves the pure spiritual milk, the word of the Lord, the *good news that was preached to you*, that church will do anything to avoid malice and deceit

and hypocrisy and envy and slander, because these things destroy the very thing they are pursuing.

If you're excited for a concert, you won't avoid going to the concert because the closest parking is six blocks away. You'd walk *twelve blocks* to see that concert! You'll wait in a miserable storm to get inside because of how much you want to be at that concert. People have stood in line for days for a stupid phone release or the latest Jordans.

I sometimes see those stupid questions on social media asking if you'd give up cell phones and TV and such for a month in a beautiful wooded cabin for a million dollars. Duh. *Who wouldn't?* I get that cell phones are a necessary part of life. I get it. But just a month? For a million bucks?! C'mon. A million bucks is absolutely worth more than the interruptions of a cell phone. The million dollars is the water that drives the air out of the beaker.

Do you see what's going on here? Peter says we must long for the pure spiritual milk. We must desire more. We must *crave* that which is utterly satisfying. Only the Lord can satisfy our deepest longings, and Peter tells us to long—long for that which the Lord offers. Long for the Lord.

In the early 1800s Thomas Chalmers preached a sermon called “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection”. It begins,

There are two ways in which a practical moralist may attempt to displace from the human heart its love of the world—either by a demonstration of the world's vanity, so as that the heart shall be prevailed upon simply to withdraw its regards from an object that is not worthy of it; or, by setting forth another object, even God, as more worthy of its attachment, so as that the heart shall be prevailed upon not to resign an old affection, which shall have nothing to succeed it, but to exchange an old affection for a new one.

Thomas Chalmers, “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection”

He goes on to explain the first way, that of despising sin, is not all that effective. You cannot simply *remove* affection for the things of this world from your heart because *nature abhors a vacuum*. Instead, he says a new affection for that which is truly beautiful and desirable has an expulsive power to displace or push out the old affection.

You cannot simply pull old affections from your heart. You must push them out with something greater. You must *expel* the old affections with the power of a new affection. This is what Paul is getting at in 2 Corinthians 3.

2 Cor 3:18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:18

As we fill ourselves with the glory of the Lord, with “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” as he says in the very next chapter, there is less and less room for these old affections. We don't have to draw a vacuum on our hearts; we have to create pressure, and that pressure comes from seeing the Lord Jesus and longing for him, for he is the pure spiritual milk..

Years ago I knew a man who desperately struggled with an addiction to pornography. It was greatly affecting his marriage and there seemed to be no way out for him. He tried everything. Accountability partners. Apps on his phone and computer. Small group therapy. None of it worked. One day he was given a systematic theology book. Systematic theology is simply the attempt to make sense of the whole of Scripture's teaching in an organized way. Being an engineer he loved it. He read the book cover to cover—all 1,200 pages of it.

As he read he grew in wonder. The goodness of God on display in the book overwhelmed him. God is so glorious and so vast. No one can plumb the depths of God. It's like the song we sang last week: "if I had a thousand tongues I still couldn't sing in a thousand days the praise I should bring for the thousand ways that you are deserving of all my praise—you're eternally worthy". The more he read the more overcome he was with the beauty of God in Christ through his Spirit.

Near the end of the book he realized he had gone weeks without feeding his addiction. It wasn't that he finally found something that "works". It's that his new affection had driven out—expelled—the old affection. He learned what Thomas Chalmers meant about the expulsive power of a new affection. He didn't pull the sin out of his heart; it was driven out by a greater love and passion for the Lord.

This doesn't mean he no longer struggles. It means he now has the means to engage in the battle. He doesn't engage by trying harder; he engages by worshiping more, by fixing his eyes on Jesus, by looking to the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Moms, if you're filled with worry for your children, it wouldn't help if I simply told you to stop worrying for them. If you're struggling with addiction, acting like that old Phil Donahue sketch and barking, "Just stop it" won't help you actually stop it. If you're concerned about your financial situation telling you God has everything under control feels like a platitude designed to just distract you.

Instead, Peter says look to Christ. Long for the pure spiritual milk. The truth of God in Christ is that he loves your children more than you ever could, and so you can trust him with their welfare and their salvation. The truth of God in Christ is that he has come to break loose the chains that enslave us. He's the one who causes the new birth. Look to him for rescue. The truth of God in Christ is that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; he is a God who provides, even as he may walk with you through a financial difficulty. He can be trusted in the midst of it.

Peter writes this letter to these exiles living in a foreign land, telling them to fill up with the Lord Jesus. Indulge in the good news of Jesus. Long for this pure spiritual milk. New City, *we* are the elect exiles living in a foreign land. We are those who must remain faithfully present regardless of what the world thinks of us. The only way this is possible, the only way you and I can get through this life faithfully, is to fill up with the Lord Jesus.