

## Get Milk • 1 Peter 2:1-3

Some people have hard lives. Bad people and awful circumstances surround them. Everything goes wrong. The neighbors are mean. Their relatives are weird. The government is corrupt. The courts are unjust. And the church is a mess. When we hear their litany of complaints we want to shout at them, “Do you ever think the problem might be you?”

There is a dangerous victim mentality that says everything that goes wrong is someone else’s fault. The whole world is against me. It can become a sad excuse for irresponsibility.

When Peter counseled first century Christians about how to succeed when life gets tough they were already surrounded by enormous persecution and difficulty. He told them how to survive and thrive when surrounded by sin and oppression. However, he also tells Christians to look inside ourselves and make sure that we aren’t causing our own problems.

We may not be able to do anything to change the people or circumstances around us but we can do something to change ourselves. Here’s what Peter had to say:

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Peter sounds like a first century spiritual environmentalist when he tells us to get rid of the toxins in our lives. If we don’t watch out it is possible that our lives will become toxic waste dumps bubbling with the chemicals of sin and self-destruction. The picture that he paints is of a Christian who has allowed the toxins of sin to build up inside us until we are too radioactive to live for God and to live other people. Peter’s advice is to “get rid” of the toxins. The word he uses literally means to “strip off one’s clothes”. It is to unload the bad stuff in our lives. His list of bad stuff includes “. . . all

malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.”

Toxin number one is malice. Actually, it is a generic title for anything and everything that is bad. We live in a world where there is wickedness galore and we need to get rid of it all. “Malice” comes from the same root that gives us our word “malignant”. We all know that there are many different types of cancers, and we don’t want any of them.

It is almost as if Peter is telling us we need to do a CT scan of our souls to check for any sins that are polluting us from the inside out. Those sins may include anything from selfishness to murder, from a bad attitude to bad actions. Is there anything sinful in our lives that should be confessed to God, forgiven and dumped?

On the one hand, Peter wants to be generic but he also wants to be specific so he moves on to toxin number two which is deceit. Deceit is misleading others for selfish purposes. It is something we are all prone to do on a regular basis. Sometimes it is telling a technical truth but actually doing it in a way that is designed to manipulate and control another person’s behavior.

This is the person who washes the engine to disguise an oil leak before selling the car through a classified ad. It is the student who plagiarizes someone else’s paper in order to get a good grade. It is the job applicant who exaggerates skills and responsibilities at the last company in order to land a better job.

Deceit is representing myself as better than I am. It is withholding full information. It is tricking the other person into doing what I want them to do. It is a toxin of the soul.

Toxin number three is hypocrisy. The New Testament was first written in Greek and then translated into English. However, some words were not translated; they were actually left in Greek. This is one of those occasions. So the word Peter wrote was actually “hy-

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pocrisy”.

“Hypocrisy” is the term that was used to describe actors on the Greek stage. They were pretending to be someone they were not. That’s okay in a play but it is a toxin in real life.

There is often a temptation to play a part. We pretend we are better than we really are. We learn the lines that will please other people and get us what we want. It is being inauthentic. We fear that if we ever showed who we really are people would not like us or respect us, so we live much, if not all, of life as if we are actors on a stage playing a part that is not our own.

Toxin number four is envy. This may be one of the most common pollutants of the soul. Envy is comparing ourselves to others and wanting what they have. It is a deep dissatisfaction with who we are and what we have.

Envy is feeling good about bad things that happen to other people or feeling bad about good things that happen to other people. Envy is when I feel rotten because you received a promotion, because you have lots of friends, because you have success. Envy is when I feel great because you were fired, because you are sick, because you got caught, because you failed.

Envy is the opposite of love. Love wants the best in another person’s life. Envy wants the worst in another person’s life.

Number five on Peter’s list is slander. Slander is saying bad things about other people. It is usually done when the other person is not present. Slander is definitely a feel-good sin. It feels good to gossip about other people and to put somebody else down. Slander makes me feel more important. In the constant war of rankings, I try to move up a notch by pushing someone else down a notch.

We often rationalize this sin by insisting that what we are saying is true. But the issue here is not truth-or-lie, it is building-up or putting-down another person.

We all know that there are some people with whom our reputation is always safe. They will always take our side, build us up and make us look good (sometimes when we don’t deserve it!). There are others who will always criticize, tear us down and make us look bad. They are the slanderers.

There is a strange irony about slander. The more we tear down others the lower we drop ourselves. It not only hurts others but it hurts us as well.

This is not an exhaustive list. The toxins of the soul come with hundreds of names and in thousands of different flavors. I do, however, find it interesting that when Peter gives his list he includes no theological heresies, no sexual sins and no social injustices. They are all important, to be sure, but this particular list is about sins of the soul that hinder Christian love for one another. The point here is not so much the specific sins of which we are guilty. The point is that we must get rid of these things.

Just as we start every day looking in the mirror and washing in the shower before we head out to meet other people, Peter is saying that we should look into our own souls and say that neither God nor anyone else should ever see us like this. What we need to do is wash up, clean up. We need to confess our sins, change our behavior and get rid of the spiritual toxins.

Before we leave Peter’s point, take a quick personal inventory of your inside self. What are the toxins that need to go? I Peter 2:1 says, “. . . rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.”

Getting rid of toxins is fine but it is not good enough. To be healthy and to grow we need to be nourished. Peter goes on to tell how to grow spiritually strong and healthy. He writes, “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

The picture here is of a brand new baby. Around the world in every country and culture babies are fed milk. Some babies are born with their mouths open, ready to eat. Most don’t take long to catch on to what will be a lifelong priority of consuming calories 365 days a year.

Milk is an amazing food. Some call it “the most nearly perfect food” because it is loaded with nutrients—carbohydrates, fats, minerals, proteins and vitamins. Carbohydrates and fats are sources of energy. Minerals, proteins and vitamins are especially important for growth. Interestingly, all milk (human and animal) contains the same basic nutrients although in different

amounts and percentages.

The purity of the milk is critical. It starts out as whole milk but it can be turned into butter, cheese, sour cream, ice cream, yogurt and many more variations. When the ads ask if you “Got Milk?” they don’t necessarily require a white upper lip. You may not like milk in a glass but love milk in a candy bar, ice cream cone or slice of cheese.

Of course, when St. Peter asked if we “got milk?” he’s not talking about the white liquid from the cow. He is talking about “pure spiritual milk”. The Greek word he uses for “spiritual” primarily refers to the Word of God in the Bible. However, it can also be broader than that.

What do we need to grow spiritually? We need a regular diet of the truth of God. Like modern dairy products there are many ways in which spiritual milk can be consumed. Read the Bible. Listen to sermons. Read books. Sign up with a spiritual mentor. Teach Sunday School. Memorize key verses from the Bible. Meditate on God’s truth. Pray—especially having silent times in your prayers when you are listening for what God has to say to you. Fast—special periods of abstaining from food to spiritually focus.

But Peter goes on to say that this spiritual nourishment must be “pure”. The implication is that contaminated spiritual food is on the market. God’s truth is sometimes contaminated by heresy, politics, greed or stupidity.

We live at a time when we are very careful about health. We want restaurants inspected. We expect food servers to wash their hands. We get a clean plate when returning to a buffet line. We check expiration dates on refrigerator food. (One comedian told his mother that hers isn’t a refrigerator, it’s a museum!). You don’t need a college degree in microbiology to be careful about the purity of what you buy and eat—just some common sense and constant caution.

The same goes for our spiritual food. Just use some common sense about what you hear and

believe. Make sure you get the purest possible spiritual teachings and nourishment from God. Every Christian should be careful to get the purest possible spiritual milk—read the label; check out preachers and teachers; read books with a cautious alertness; don’t swallow everything you hear on the radio. “Crave *pure* spiritual milk.”

Without spiritual nourishment none of us will ever grow. The whole idea is that “you may grow up in your salvation.” Salvation presupposes something. It assumes that we know we are lost from God without Jesus. Salvation is when Jesus finds us and when we accept his forgiveness from sins. (It’s like a sailor who falls overboard and is

rescued by a passing fishing boat—the sailor has to be found and accept “getting saved”.)

Once a person has been saved from sin by Jesus that person is a Christian, but a baby Christian. It is the spiritual milk of God that enables Christians to “grow up in your salvation”.

In human physiology we grow for about eighteen years and then we start shrinking. (Well, we may get wider but we stop getting taller!) But spiritual growth takes a lifetime. Some people stay underdeveloped for years. Others grow quickly. The way it’s supposed to be is that every Christian grows up and up and up inside their salvation.

So, how are you doing? How have you grown spiritually in the past 12 months? You may think that’s hard to measure. But suppose each of us asked the ten people who know us best to give us a spiritual growth score. How do you think you would rate? I know lots of people I would rate very high. They have been downing pure spiritual milk by the gallons and growing like giants. How about you?

There is one last phrase Peter adds to his spiritual growth diet for Christians: “. . . now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.” There seems to be an assumption here that once you’ve

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really had a taste of Jesus you're going to want more.

One of the many forms of dairy products is pizza. Cheese is a major ingredient. When I was a boy I was an embarrassingly picky eater. I had two basic rules: 1.) Don't eat anything green; 2.) Don't eat anything new.

When I was about 8 or 10 years old my parents took our family to an Italian restaurant called Joe's Pizzeria on Bloomfield Avenue. They ordered pizza. I made it very clear that I wouldn't eat it. They asked, "Why not?" and I said, "Because I don't like pizza." They asked, "How do you know if you've never tasted it?" And I told them I just knew.

There was a lot of family negotiating as I skillfully turned a happy family outing into a total family disaster. Finally, the waiter said that he would ask the cook to make a hamburger. I agreed. I never finished the hamburger, though, because it was on an Italian roll instead of a regular hamburger roll and that came under Rule #2: Don't eat anything new.

A few visits later I did something unusual and courageous. In a wild moment of abandon I ate a bite of pizza, and it was really good. I finished the slice. I wanted more. Pizza became a lifelong favorite food.

Peter is the spiritual server who is challenging us to crave pure spiritual milk. He wants us to try reading the Bible. Try praying. Try getting to know God better. Live by faith and grow spiritually because once you taste the goodness of God you will like it. Quit eating and drinking the toxins of sin and fill up on the goodness of God!

Peter expects that what happens to us is what he has seen happen to so many others—we will get a taste of the goodness of God, we will experience the joys of being a fully committed disciple of Jesus, we will try it and like it.

In the first years of Christianity the church used many interesting symbols that we have not carried into modern practice. When a person be-

came a Christian one of the most important events that followed was believer's baptism. In those early years they would go to a river or to a lake and they would baptize the new believer, thereby identifying them with Jesus Christ and his death, his burial and his resurrection. Family and friends, people from the neighborhood—they would all come to see this.

The new Christian was dressed in white, symbolic of the purification from sin that came when a person believed in Jesus as Savior. Standing before the crowd just before the baptism the new Christian was given a glass of milk to drink. It was a powerful symbol of present and future spiritual growth.

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In other words: "Get milk!"

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