

This Exiled Life – Part 2

Live Like Newborn Babies

1 Peter 2:1-3
Mark Vroegop

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 (ESV)

To be a Christian is to be an exile.

No matter what time of history you choose or which country we are talking about, Christians have always been exiles. Christianity's belief that the Bible is authoritative, that all ethics – including sexual ethics – are determined outside of ourselves, that Jesus is the only way to salvation, and that the gospel should be shared with the intention of making converts has always put Christianity in an awkward or dangerous spot with the prevailing culture.

Some of you experienced that at a very personal level over the holidays. As you gathered with friends and family, I'm sure that there were many situations that developed where it became painfully obvious that you are different. What you think, what you do, why you do what you do, and a host of other things related to your view of life may have surfaced. Some of you faced the decision about whether it was the right moment to share your views and offer a counter opinion. Some of you were in a position where you had to love a hard person or be kind in a way that seemed a bit unfair.

If we took a survey, I bet that you'd be surprised how many people who name the name of Christ faced some level of tension or significant opposition during the holiday season.

To be a Christian is to be an exile.

Back to 1 Peter

In September of last year, we began a study of the book of 1 Peter to try to understand what it means to be a spiritual exile. I had a number of goals as we began this study:

1. I wanted to remind us that Christians have always been exiles so that you will not be surprised when Christianity feels weird
2. I wanted to encourage you to see the shifting culture as an opportunity to embrace
3. I wanted to motivate you to pursue a deeper level of godliness and a greater understanding of the value of the community of your church

The central burden behind this series was to connect where you live, right now, with what the Bible says about being an exile back then. I felt the need see if I could help us learn how to live out God's

plan for our lives when the cultural forces put us in a position that is challenging. This can happen at any level. It might take place when a friend asks you a question about your beliefs on morality or sexual ethics. It can happen as you try to have a discussion in your small group as a new believer is working through questions about his former lifestyle. It can happen as you try to raise children when they come home with comments or questions from school. It can happen at work when you hear about a policy that is being considered. And it can happen culturally through court decisions or laws that are passed that do not reflect your values.

1 Peter is written to a group of people who were becoming exiles without moving. Their displacement was not geographic; it was a spiritual and cultural exile. And Peter writes to them to help them understand this reality so that they can thrive in the midst of it. 1 Peter is a book full of gospel-hope as the people of God really come to terms with who they are and what God has called them to be and do.

In that respect the pressure of the exile is actually a very positive thing. The cultural challenges in a believer's life can actually produce some wonderful results by calling the followers of Jesus to really count the cost and by making the gospel distinct and unique to the world. The church has always been an exile community.

The challenge and danger, you see, is not when the church fully realizes this reality. No, the danger is when the church forgets that this is who we are. Christianity has historically not been very effective or attractive when it just blends into the culture and goes "undercover." If no one in your family, in your fraternity, in your school, in your workplace, or in your neighborhood knows that you are a Christian and that you are different, there is a huge problem.

So far, we've simply covered the first chapter of 1 Peter, and we looked at the following:

- vv. 1-12 – That there is a divine plan and a spiritual inheritance that is behind everything that is happening to us such that we can rejoice in difficult days
- vv. 13-21 – Believers can have minds that are set on the grace of God, and we can allow that to shape our lives such that we are a holy people
- vv. 22-25 – We can allow the living and abiding Word to create spiritual life in us such that "we love one another from a pure heart"

These themes will emerge again as we study chapters 2-5 from now until the middle of June. We will be walking verse-by-verse through 1 Peter through the first half of 2017 except for a four-week series in March called "All In: A Biblical Strategy for Intentional Living," and our THINK|17 conference, which will feature Dr. Erwin Lutzer on the subject of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. And then we have some great things planned for the summer and the fall.

A Word-Saturated People

We stopped our study of 1 Peter in verses 1:22-25, and our text today is really a continuation of what Peter was saying in the first chapter. This is one of those spots where the chapter break, which wasn't a part of the original manuscript but inserted in the 13th century, makes it seem as if there is an entirely

new thought. But it isn't. The point of 1:22-25 is that Christian exiles are people who get their life from the Word.

²² Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, ²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; 1 Peter 1:22-23 (ESV)

The point of that text is simply that the Word of God creates a kind of people who are different. The Word creates their new birth ("born again"), and it results in a community marked by a unique love for one another. What's more, according to verses 24-25, this Word has an enduring quality to it. The gospel came to these people, and it permanently changed them.

1 Peter 2 is a continuation of that theme. Verses 1-10 further identify what a gospel-shaped, Word-saturated people will look and act like. You see, it is not just that individual people are exiles, but the entire community is a gathering of exiles. The challenges that they face are not just outside of the body of Christ, but also inside the body of Christ.

Being an exile affects how you think about yourself, how you respond to people inside the body of Christ, and how you respond to the culture around you.

Verses 1-3 are specifically addressed to the exiled community and what kind of people they should be. The first word of verse one connects these thoughts. Since they have been born again by the imperishable seed of the Word of God, and since the Word of God remains forever, what should be the characteristics of this Word-saturated people? In the midst of all the pressures outside of the church, what should be the aroma of the church on the inside?

As I go through these, would you listen for one or two growth points that perhaps the Lord will reveal to you? You could use this first message on 1 Peter to be a point of emphasis for personal renewal and re-commitment. Let me divide this text into four marks of a Word-saturated community.

1) Godly Relationships

The first mark of a Word-saturated, exiled community is the way that people inside that community treat one another. There is supposed to be something uniquely different about the people and their relationships. As the pressure from the culture becomes greater and greater, the culture inside the church becomes even more critical. It can become a sanctuary in ways that are unique and compelling.

Peter tells them that there are some behaviors that they are "to put away." The idea of this word is that there are things that simply do not fit with what the community of Christ is to be like, and those things should be removed from the people's lives. You could think of it as something that should be gotten rid of or taken off. The word is used for the laying down of garments (Acts 7:58), casting off the works of darkness (Rom. 13:12), putting off the old self (Eph. 4:22), and laying aside sins that hinder our endurance (Heb. 12:1). It is a common word used in the New Testament in reference to godly behavior.

There are actions and attitudes that just do not fit. In fact, they so clearly don't fit that it is very obvious that those things should be taken off and discarded. Think of it as an old varsity jacket or skinny jeans on a 60-year-old man, or wearing a Christmas sweater in February. It is clothing that just should be not be worn. It just doesn't fit.

In the same way, Peter identifies five different sin issues that negatively affect relationships, and these things should be discarded from our lives and from the community of Christ.

Malice – This is a laundry-list and all-encompassing term for evil and wickedness in a general sense. And it specifically relates to relationships marked by hostility, dislike, or hateful feelings. You could think of it as being a trouble-maker. Relationships suffer when people are intentionally trying to create problems.

Guile – Deception and deceit are other words that could be used here. This is in reference to the kind of talking that is dishonest or conniving and that intends harm for another person (Rom. 3:13, Matt. 26:4). It is the kind of conversation that makes you wonder, "what did THAT mean?" Good relationships are really difficult when you have nuances as to what people say and what they mean.

Hypocrisy – I'm sure that I don't need to explain this word because you know it on one level. It means to have two faces, to have two tongues, or to be two people, depending on the situation or the crowd that you are around. The word means to act in a way or give the impression of one motive when there really is another agenda. Hypocrisy destroys the trust that is the foundation of good relationships.

Envy – This is a particularly sinister evil. It is not the same as jealousy. Do you know the difference? Jealousy is when you want what other people have, but envy is what you feel when you just don't want *them* to have something. It emerges when you are so sinfully negative about some people that you cannot stand it when they are successful in anything or in any way. It is the opposite of being able to rejoice with people when they are blessed. Relationships do not thrive in an environment marked by this kind of sinful and self-centered competition.

Slander – You can define this as speech that is intended to harm a person's name or reputation. It is interesting and instructive that this is the same word that Peter uses in 2:12 and 3:16 for the kind of speech that the world uses against Christians in persecution. And James 4:11 specifically prohibits this kind of talk among brothers in Christ. Slander destroys relationships inside the church because it is a kind of verbal assault that impacts a person's reputation.

So, these are the kinds of relationship sins that need to be taken off and gotten rid of. They are not to be a part of the community of Christ. Where malice, guile, hypocrisy, envy, and slander exist, there will be all manner of relational problems and other sin issues that emerge. And what's worse, malice, guile, hypocrisy, envy, and slander are the kind of arrows that the world hurls at Christians. Therefore, the church of Jesus Christ should be a place where people can find relational sanctuary. The Christian community should be a place marked by love, honesty, genuineness, joy, and encouragement. Christian relationships, birthed out of the supernatural work of God, should reflect the fruit of God's work in their lives.

Now before we leave this point, it would be easy to agree with everything I just said and do nothing about it. Listen! There is not a single person within the church who doesn't need to take heed of this list, so can I ask you to think about which of those five need to be put off from your life today? Every one of us has some growing to do in some area as it relates to malice, guile, hypocrisy, envy, and slander. And where those insidious sins exist, godly relationships will not flourish. A Word-centered community will be marked by something different than malice, guile, hypocrisy, envy, and slander.

2) Longing for the Word

The second mark of this Word-saturated community is a unique longing for the Word. It is interesting that Peter positions this statement here. I mean, he talked about being born again by the Word in 1:23, and then he highlights the living, abiding, and enduring quality of the Word in 1:23 and 25. Then he talks about sin issues. And then he returns to the Word but with a particular focus on the way in which believers are to desire the Word.

One of the reasons I think he does this is because a Word-centered heart, a Word-saturated mind, and Word-loving people must necessarily live differently. In other words, malice, guile, hypocrisy, envy, and slander do not live very long in a culture saturated by the Word. I know this to be true in my own life. I've seen it over and over again. When the Word is not sufficiently present in my life or in my thinking, or when I start to allow the narrative of my own desires to drive my actions and attitudes, it isn't long until wicked things start dominating my mind, heart, and mouth.

A very helpful strategy for putting off malice, guile, hypocrisy, envy, and slander is to be sure that individually and corporately we are regularly leaning into the Word. The Word is the means by which our hearts and minds are renewed. Take, for instance, what the Psalmist said about the Word in the 119th Psalm:

⁹ How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. Psalm 119:9 (ESV)

¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Psalm 119:105 (ESV)

¹⁶⁹ Let my cry come before you, O LORD; give me understanding according to your word! Psalm 119:169 (ESV)

There is a direct correlation between the presence of the Word and the kind of actions and attitudes that fit with God's heart.

That is why Peter describes the passion for the Word as that of a new-born infant. Now he is not using this term or the reference to milk to indicate spiritual immaturity as in Colossians 3:1-3 or Hebrews 5:11-14. Rather, he is using a familiar example of relentless, dependent passion. After all, a baby that is hungry must be fed. Its life depends on regular feeding, and a baby will not be consoled when hunger sets in. The piercing cry of a hungry baby is impossible to compete with.

Therefore, Peter calls believers to be the kind of people who are relentless in their passion to have the Word in their life. He even uses the word "long" or "crave" (NIV), the same word used in Psalm 42:1 to

describe the panting of deer for water and, by implication, the heart for God. It is also used in Psalm 84:2 for the passion that one should feel for the courts of God: "my soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord." A longing for the Word is a longing for God Himself as revealed through the Word!

What we hold in our hands, what we linger over, what we mark and underline, what we memorize are the very words of God. It is "pure spiritual milk," the true, unadulterated, and life-changing revelation of God to mankind.

Can I ask you what your attitude and passion is like for the Word today? Do you have a desire to read the Word so that it transforms your life? Do you make time for it? Do you prioritize your personal intake of the Word? For some of you the start of a new year is a really good time to take a growth step in this category.

Beyond the personal time in the Word, do you have anyone with whom you talk about the Word? Do you have a community of people where you study the Word together? Do you have a small group, Bible study, or discipleship group where you are learning from one another? When you come on Sundays, are you leaning into the singing and teaching of God's Word? Let me encourage you to come hungry, to come ready, and to come with anticipation. And if you are honest enough to say "I'm not there," can I invite you to pray this prayer from Psalm 86:11 – *"Teach me your way, O Lord . . . unite my heart to fear your name."*

3) Growth into Salvation

The effect of this passion and longing for the Word is a real and tangible growth. This is where Christianity in general, and Bible intake in particular, begins to get really exciting and thrilling. We begin to see the cause/effect relationship between what the Bible says and what is going on in our lives.

This is what it means when the Bible says that it is "living and abiding" (1 Peter 1:23) or "living and active" (Heb. 4:12). The idea is that the Bible has a transforming effect. The goal is not just to know information about the Bible, but to have the Bible really shape your thinking, your affections, and your actions.

In the 1980s there was a board game that took Evangelicalism by storm. Bible Trivia was a board game whose tag line was "Where the trivia is not trivial," and you answered a series of questions that moved you up and down a rainbow three times. The final question was answered from the dove in the middle of the board. Others of you may remember being a part of Bible quizzing where you competed against other kids in a Jeopardy-style game, answering various questions about the Bible. Now I have nothing against either of those activities, unless we are content to stop with the facts and information about the Bible and not allow it to do its work of transformation in our lives. The Bible was meant to be studied for transformation, not trivia.

Peter's goal is that we may "grow up into salvation." What does that mean? I think he is using "salvation" the same way as in verse 5, where he says that they are being "guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." Sometimes the word "salvation" is used for the point of

time when a person receives Christ – they “are saved” (Rom. 10:9-10). But in other cases, the word is used to describe the entire process of God’s redemptive work from beginning to end. Romans 13:11 says “. . . salvation is nearer than when we first believed.” In this way, it refers to God’s plan to bring our salvation to its intended end and completion.

Therefore, Peter is saying that we are to grow in a manner that fits with what salvation is all about. This means sanctification at one level, but we shouldn’t limit it just to that category. He certainly means that we should grow in righteousness and godliness. No doubt about that. But there is more here.

The meaning is connected to the entire purpose for which we were saved in the first place. Peter is connecting a Word-saturated community, the putting off of sins that do not fit, and a longing for the Word into a category that makes sense if you have really experienced salvation. In other words, to grow is the natural effect of true conversion. In other words, in the same way that something is terribly wrong if a child doesn’t experience growth, so too something is seriously malfunctioning if a believer is not experiencing some kind of spiritual growth in his or her life.

A believer has been born again with an imperishable seed by the living and abiding Word of God (1 Peter 1:23). Something supernatural is going to take place! So, if you are not experiencing any growth in your life, it would be good to take careful inventory of what it really means for you to be a follower of Jesus. It may be that you enjoy the trivia of the Word but not the transformation of the word. Or it may even be that others of you are experiencing some degree of doubt or lack of assurance in your life. One of the best ways for assurance to take root in your life is to get serious about tackling one sin issue. In seeing the change that happens, your heart is reassured that you are indeed being transformed by the Lord.

And if in the last year, you have seen growth in your life, then you should thank the Lord because that is a miraculous change that only He could create in you. It is the kind of transformation that happens outside of yourself, by the Word and by the work of the Holy Spirit.

A Word-saturated people are characterized by supernatural and tangible growth that fits with salvation.

4) Satisfaction in the Lord

The final characteristic relates to the previous statement about salvation but approaches it from the vantage point of a person’s satisfaction in the Lord. The Word-saturated community was to be a people who had tasted of the Lord’s goodness.

It seems that Peter likes Psalm 34 because this sounds very similar to Psalm 34:8, and he quotes the Psalm directly in 1 Peter 3:10-12. Psalm 34 is for those who are afflicted or suffering, and Peter uses it here to emphasize the way in which the people of God have tasted His goodness and kindness.

In coming to faith in Christ, and in considering all that God has done for them through Jesus (1:3-9), believers have experienced the goodness and kindness of God. In fact, this satisfaction in the work of God in their lives is what gives them hope in the midst of suffering loss while in exile. Being in exile

means that you live with a sense of joy and contentment because you love the plan of God more than any other plan. Following Jesus, while not always easy, is something you chose because of the offering of greater joy and satisfaction. The radical transformation of the gospel is the fact that God changes your "tastes." You have tasted of the Lord's goodness, and that serves as a compelling motivator for digesting the Word, for righteous living, and for participating in a Word-saturated community.

You live as an exile, not because you have to, but because you want to. You live as an exile, not because it is commanded, but because it is better.

And where do you develop such a mindset, and how do you sustain this kind of perspective? By saturating your mind and heart with the Word. To be a Christian is to be an exile. But to think like an exile, you have to know the Bible.

A Step Forward in the Word

As we start 2017, can I issue a few challenges as it relates to your intake of the Word? Let me offer a few applications:

- If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, I'd love for you to ask someone whom you know is a Christian if they would walk you through the gospel of John for the next three months. Ask them to help you understand what it really means to be a follower of Jesus.
- Every year we post on our blog some excellent Bible reading plans. I would encourage you to check out the various ways that you can intentionally read and study the Bible this year.
- Some of you need to take the step of officially identifying with this church in membership this year or taking the step of joining a Small Group, where you can study the Word with other people. You need to adjust your family calendar to make this fit 1-2 times per month.
- If there is only one step that you would take today, let me invite you to join the Fighter Verse challenge. This is an excellent resource that we are blessed to have through Children Desiring God. We publish a verse each week in the bulletin; there is also an app that you can use, and there are many resources that will greatly bless your family in helping you with family devotions. The idea is that together our church is memorizing the same verse throughout the week. We are all focusing on this same verse and getting it worked into our thinking.

Regardless of which step you choose or what action you need to take, let's be the kind of church that is marked by a saturation with the Word. In our individual times in the Word, in our Small Groups, in our homes, and in memorization, let's be the kind of people who are so marked by the Word that being an exile just makes sense. Because to be a Word-saturated Christians means that you will be an exile. To be a Christian is to be an exile.

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