

1 Peter 2:1-3 | “The Basics of Spiritual Growth”

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How do you measure growth in a church? Isn't it so easy to measure growth simply in terms of numbers? In our American mindset, we want to be successful, so we try to measure growth in ways that are tangible and easily measurable, like numbers.

Many people believe that the size of a crowd determines success. But what if I told you that numbers weren't the main way to assess spiritual growth? In fact, by only calculating growth by numbers, you are greatly missing out on the main way that the Bible focuses on when it comes to growth. You see, God cares about our church's *spiritual* growth above all. In fact, the very churches that we think are “growing” are the very churches not actually growing spiritually.

Let me give you an example. Located near Chicago is a megachurch called Willow Creek Community Church. For decades, the church was a numerically growing church with about 25,000 attendees. Especially in the 90's, Willow Creek was like the model church that many other churches aspired to be. They were seeker-sensitive, trying to get as many people in the doors as possible, and they promoted their way of growing a church as the pattern to follow. But in 2007, they revealed an interesting study that they did of their own church.<sup>1</sup>

They conducted a three year study into whether their philosophy and programs were actually growing people spiritually. And what were the results? They found that they were producing numbers, but not disciples. More people may have filled the seats, but the church wasn't producing sound disciples of Jesus Christ.

Even their senior pastor, Bill Hybels, said this, “Some of the stuff that we have put millions of dollars into thinking it would really help our people grow and develop spiritually, when the data actually came back it wasn't helping people that much. Other things that we didn't put that much money into and didn't put much staff against is stuff our people are crying out for.”<sup>2</sup>

So what they found was that what appeared to be successful in man's perspective, wasn't actually successful at all when it came to what was most important in God's eyes. Shocking, right? That's because when it comes to growth, we focus too much on numbers rather than on the spiritual growth of people.

And the passage that we will look at this morning helps us to redirect our focus back on the basics of spiritual growth. It's not in attracting seekers with bounce houses, free t-shirts, and giving shallow, watered-down messages, but it's found in the Word of God. It is the Word that grows disciples of Jesus. We see that point ever so clearly in our text.

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<sup>1</sup> Book called, Reveal: Where are You? by Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson.

<sup>2</sup> “First-Person: A shocking confession from Willow Creek Community Church leaders,” by Bob Burney on BaptistPress.com, Nov. 6, 2007.  
<https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/first-person-a-shocking-confession-from-willow-creek-community-church-leaders/>

Peter's main command in this passage is this: **“Long for the pure spiritual milk.”**

Now before we get any further, let's begin by looking at the very first word of chapter 2: “So...” This could also be translated, “Therefore.” So this passage is building off of what we just learned, and that means that it is even more important that we take the context into account.

Last week, we learned that we ought to love one another earnestly, and we learned that we have been born again by the Word of God. So now Peter is saying, “In light of the fact that you are to love one another, therefore put away these community-harming sins. In light of the truth that you have been born again by the Word, so now grow by the Word.” That's why Peter says, “So,” at the beginning of the chapter.

The fact that this is a command means that it's important for us to know and do. We should long for the pure spiritual milk. To ‘long’ here points to desiring something strongly and persistently or to crave something. This isn't an apathetic or lackluster thing, but a passionate, strong desire and longing for something. And what are we to crave? Pure spiritual milk.

This is talking about the Word of God, as he just finished speaking about the Word of the Lord at the end of the last chapter. So basically, he's telling us to crave the spiritual nourishment found in the Bible, and he uses milk to represent this.

Many people know the famous ad campaign for milk whenever they hear the phrase, “got milk?” But many others may remember the ad campaign before that back in the 80's when the commercials would say, “Milk it does a body good.” And the advertisement would say that milk would make you big and strong, and that it was good for your teeth, bones, and hair.

Well in our text, it's like Peter is saying, “Milk it does a *Christian* good.” Yet this milk isn't necessarily good for your physical health, but it's good for your spiritual health, for it is *spiritual* milk.

When you study Scripture, every word matters, there are no words written that are meaningless. So when we see that Peter adds the word, “pure,” it must be important. This spiritual milk is *pure* spiritual milk. There is nothing added or mixed in with the Word. There are no lies, falsehoods, or deceptive statements in Scripture, but it is the pure Word of God. It is all truth, with no impurities or imperfections. It will never lead you astray, for it is pure truth.

Many food labels make sure to describe their product by what's NOT in it. Like, “No preservatives. No additives. No artificial flavors.” Or they will say, “100% natural,” or a fruit drink will say, “100% juice.”

Well Peter is reminding us that the Word is 100% pure, there are no additives included. The Word of God is not watered down truth, and therefore, we should never water it down ourselves when we talk about it! We don't shy away from the ‘difficult to hear’ passages. We don't water down it's message to make it more acceptable to modern day ears. But we unashamedly proclaim the pure Word of God!

Yet not only do we proclaim the pure Word, but when we personally look for truth, we look to the pure Word alone.

There has always been a tendency of people, when looking for truth, to look to the Bible *plus something else*. Instead of longing for the Word to learn about ourselves, people have been longing for the insights found in the Enneagram. Instead of longing for the Word to learn about how to solve racism, people have been longing for the insights found in Critical Race Theory. Instead of longing for the Word to answer the most foundational questions of life, people have been longing for insights found in science or philosophy. This cannot do. Our longing should be for the Word!

Certainly Christian books can *aid* our growth when they point to and expound the truths found in the Word, but it's the Word that is and should be our primary sustenance. Certainly science can *aid* our understanding of the world, but only if it is in line with the truth of the Bible. Christian, LONG for the pure spiritual milk of the Word!

But here's the question: How do we long for his Word more? How can you actually grow in a desire? Well our passage shows us. First...

### **I. Longing for the Word comes the more you put off sin. (1)**

'Longing' is actually the main verb of this passage, not 'put away.' So what that tells me is that putting away sin aids us in longing for more of the Word. If you look at the flow of the passage, it tells us to put away sin, and then to long for the pure spiritual milk. So putting away sin is absolutely critical to cultivating a stronger desire for the Word of God.

The verb means to lay aside or take off, like taking off and laying aside dirty clothes. It is this decisive, conscious choice to no longer do these sins, and it takes active effort.

Think about taking off and laying aside your old clothes. It takes a choice to do it, and it takes actually doing it. You can't just live your life and think, 'My clothes will just change themselves at some point.' No, you must take them off and put them aside - so it is with sin. You can't ignore sin and think that all will be well. You can't turn a blind eye to your sin, and think that you will grow in your walk with the Lord. You must put away sin! You must think, "Through God's help, I am going to strive to no longer sin in these ways."

Do you know what it takes? It takes a hatred for sin, for if you love your sin, then you won't be determined to put it off. But if you see the ugliness of your sin, and the loveliness of Christ, then you will strive to put away these sins.

Some of us, rather than putting away our sin, we hang onto it and let it fester, and then we wonder why we aren't growing in our walk with the Lord like we should. It's because growth in Christ takes a constant putting off of sin.

Think of the health and growth of your own body. There are good things that you must take into your body in order to be healthy, but there are also things that you must no longer do in order to be healthy.

You can't expect to be healthy if you are eating junk food all day everyday. You can't expect to be healthy if you sit around all day, don't get any sleep, and are filled with tons of stress. That is a recipe for *unhealthiness*. So also, that's what it's like for our spiritual health and growth. As we will find out later, the Word is the good that we must take in, but here we see that there are things that we must take off.

Sin stymies your spiritual growth, while God's Word advances your spiritual growth. And so you can't expect good progress if you are both hindering and trying to advance your growth at the same time. They will battle each other, so that's why it's even more important to keep putting off sin daily. Sin and the Word can't both be flourishing in our lives. But it's when we put off sin, and take in the Word that we start to *really* grow spiritually. The more you put off sin, the more you will long for the Word, as your desires start to become less focused on self, and more on God.

And also, going back to loving one another from the end of chapter 1, you can't love one another genuinely and earnestly without ridding yourself of these sins because these sins are community-harming sins. All of these sins are the *opposite* of love for one another. Instead, they are each the epitome of love for self, and hatred for others.

So let's look at the specific sins that Peter tells us to put off. First is malice. Malice is an intention to do evil to another person. It's those times where you think, "I want to do them harm and see them suffer!" Most often people have malice towards others when they themselves have been hurt by that person. Yet as you can see, malice is never OK, but you must put it away.

So malice is not an accident where you accidentally hurt someone, but it's when you do something to intentionally harm them in some way. Have you ever done something to someone with an evil intention? That's malice.

Deceit is next. Deceit is the action of deceiving someone. And really, when we deceive, we are saying, "I want to get what I want." So we try to trick others in getting our own way. It's this sin where getting what you want is so treasured that lies and deception become acceptable means of getting it.

Have you ever deceived someone? Have you ever twisted the truth or lied about something in order to gain an advantage or receive something? That's deceit.

The sin that follows deceit is hypocrisy. Oh, isn't this a common one? It's when you are fake in order to look better in front of others. So this is when you act like you are something that you are not, all because you want people to think better of you.

I fear that in churches all across America, this sin is rampant. God desires that we never be fake, but authentic. We don't put on a show for others, but we are to be genuine. So we don't act like we have it all together when we don't, and we don't act like we don't have struggles with sin.

Let's say that you really struggle with the sin of gossip. This doesn't mean we lose all self-control and go into church gossiping because we struggle with it, and we don't want people to think we are fake. No, but rather you don't act like you have it together, you don't look down on others who share that they struggle with it, but you readily admit to others that you too struggle with many things. Let's all strive to put away hypocrisy, and seek to be authentic and real.

Envy is the fourth sin on the list. This is when you are discontent with what you have and instead desire to have what others have. Envy says, "I want that!" and you become discontented in your situation or resentful of the person who has what you want. But what does the Bible call us to instead of having envy? It calls us to be content with what we have and to be happy for others for what they have.

This is such an easy sin to do and let go because it can be hidden from others, but Peter says, "Rid yourself of that envy! Take it off!"

And the last sin in the list is slander. Slander is an act whereby you intend to harm someone else's reputation. It is a false and damaging statement against another in order to make them look bad. It's this sin where you want someone's reputation to fall and often it's because we want our reputation to rise, instead. It's such an evil thing because it makes absolutely false claims that ruin someone.

Do you realize how mean and sinful that is? You don't care about the truth or about another person, but you just want them to suffer. Have you ever said a false and damaging thing about another person? That's slander.

If you could summarize this list of sins, how could you sum it up? These sins trick or harm others in order to get something for yourself or in order to look or feel better. It's all about love for self, and a lack of love for others.

These are community-destroying sins! Left go in a church, they will utterly destroy a church from the inside out. And yet how often do we tolerate and let these sins slide when we either see them in our own lives, or in the lives of others in the church? They cannot be let go! They are wrong and must be put away! We must see the danger of each of these sins, and each of us must determine to put them off whenever they pop up in our lives.

If you have done these sins, there is forgiveness in Christ. Repent of your sins and rest in his forgiveness, but strive with the Spirit's help to put these sins away.

Did you notice for many of these sins a word that Peter kept using? For many of these sins, he says, "Put away *all* of it." Meaning, "Don't let even a little bit linger in you, but lay it *all* aside!"

So how are you doing in putting off sin? Are you doing it at all? Do you see the importance of it? Do you keep a little bit to linger? Put off these sins, and your longing for the Word will grow.

Another way to grow in your longing for the Word is...

## **II. Longing for the Word comes when you recognize your need for it. (2)**

If you think about it, this is the most easily understandable way that you long for the Word more. If you realize that you desperately need something, then you will crave it.

In verse 2, Peter shows us that we need Scripture for spiritual growth. For he says that we should long for this milk, “that by it you may grow up into salvation.” This is the purpose and result of drinking the milk of the Word - we grow up into salvation.

Now what exactly does that mean? It means when it comes to salvation, we get saved, but then as we progress in our faith, we actually grow up in our salvation. We don’t simply wait for salvation, but we grow towards it. This is what we think of when it comes to spiritual growth or spiritual maturity.

Sometimes I will hear someone talking about another Christian and they will say, “They will never change.” And God is saying in return, “Oh yes, they can! They can through my Word!” It is His Word that changes people and grows them up in their salvation. You want to grow up when it comes to your faith? You need more Scripture! Spiritual growth doesn’t just come automatically, but it comes as we long for and take in the Bible. Spiritual growth is impossible without the Word. If you neglect the Bible, you will not grow.

I think of the Bible song that I sang as a kid, which went, “Read your Bible, pray everyday, and you’ll grow, grow, grow.” And here’s a passage, that shows how true that lyric really is.

There are many Christians who may be Christians for decades, yet they are still spiritually immature. Each of us has a physical maturity level, and then a spiritual maturity level. And hopefully, the gap between the two isn’t too big.

Isn’t it interesting that when we meet an immature middle schooler, we tell them that they need to grow up, yet when it comes to an immature Christian, we don’t say a word. We let them flounder in their immaturity and we don’t challenge them to grow up in their salvation. (Now I’m not talking about the person who was recently saved, for they will take time to grow up in their salvation, but I’m talking about the person who has been a Christian for a long time.)

This passage is giving us the blueprint for spiritual growth - long for and consume the Bible! It’s not complicated, but it does take a continual healthy dose of the right thing.

Peter tells us to crave the pure spiritual milk, and he tells us how we are to do so - like newborn infants. Think of a newborn baby. It’s easier for me to think of this because I have one! They desperately crave milk, it just comes natural for them because they are hungry. Their body tells them, “I’m hungry!” and so they cry out for more milk. Just wait a couple hours and you will

hear their longing for milk rather loudly. If you have ever had a baby, you know this first-hand, especially in the middle of the night.

As you think of Peter's illustration, it's helpful to see the connections between newborns with milk and us with the Word. Milk is absolutely necessary for the baby to be healthy and grow, so the Bible is absolutely necessary for us to be healthy and grow. As a baby only wants his or her mother's milk, so we are to only desire God's Word to grow our faith. As a baby constantly craves milk, so we are to constantly crave Scripture. As a baby eagerly craves milk, so we are to eagerly crave Scripture.

The consistency and intensity for which the baby longs for milk makes it seem like the baby is addicted and hooked on milk. So that's sort of how we should be with the Word of God - we should be addicted to it and hooked on it. We should cry out for more! We should always be thinking about our next dose of the Bible.

Some of you are like this when it comes to coffee, you're addicted to it. As soon as you're done a cup of coffee, you're thinking of when your next one will be. As soon as you wake up, you're thinking of that steaming hot "Cup of Joe".

Well what if we were like that when it came to the Word of God? Longing and craving for the next time we can read it or learn from it in our own personal Bible study or in preaching and teaching.

By using this illustration, Peter is showing us *exactly* what we need. We need the good, healthy food of the Word, while rejecting the bad, junk food of other things. He's saying, "You want to grow? You want to be healthy spiritually? Long for the Word!"

You desperately need God's Word to grow, or else without it, you will be extremely malnourished. When you see a picture of a malnourished person it points to the fact that they aren't getting the nourishment from food. So when you see a malnourished Christian, you can tell that they aren't being nourished with the right food, which is the pure Word of God. I fear that many Christians have become malnourished in their faith because of a lack of desire to read the Bible because they don't recognize their need for it. But I also fear that these Christians are malnourished because the churches they go to aren't feeding them the pure, wholesome, nutritious, and nourishing Word of God. Like physical food, we must pursue what is good for us when it comes to our spiritual food.

Do you realize your need for the Word? Maybe you're wondering why you haven't been growing in your faith, a big reason may be your lack of exposure to the Word of God. Are you daily reading it? Are you sitting under the teaching and preaching of it? Are you longing for more?

What is sad and yet revealing among many Christians is what they look for in a church. I've found that many simply look to the quality or style of music in deciding what church to attend. They look to being entertained or to being emotionally moved rather than being fed well by the Scriptures. Or they will determine where they go based on what programs or other things the church has. But the most important thing that we should be looking for in a church is do they

preach the Word? Do they preach sound, biblical sermons or do they water down the message and avoid the hard topics? Do they feed me well or do I feel constantly famished?

Entertainment in church will not grow you! Man's opinions will not grow you. No pastor's three tips to winning in life will grow you. No rambling on about your best life now will grow you. You need the pure, spiritual milk of the Word! That's what you need! We should be constantly thinking, "Give me more of the Word! Explain it! Illustrate it! Apply it! But never forsake it!"

This growth doesn't take a one time exposure of the Bible, but it takes time, like a baby grows over time by more and more milk. So don't expect one time hearing the Word preached, or once in a while reading your Bible at home to see a crazy big difference, for it takes prolonged intake of the Word, like food.

When you truly understand your need for the Bible to grow, mature, and be healthy spiritually, you will long and crave for more.

How else can we grow in our longing for the Word?...

### **III. Longing for the Word comes when you have tasted that the Lord is good. (3)**

In verse 3, Peter is building off of what he just said about longing for the Word, and he says, "If indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." That "if" is important as it makes you look and examine your life. It's given to make you slow down and consider your life before moving on - "Have *I* tasted that the Lord is good?" Because really, that's the only way that you can long for the Word, if you have first-hand experience that the Lord is good.

This "tasting" of the Lord's goodness refers to the goodness of God that we experience at salvation. All those who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ are forgiven and given new, eternal life. That is a big taste of the goodness of the Lord! So if you have tasted this goodness, then keep going back to the Word for more!

Peter is referring here to a verse in Psalm 34:8, which says, "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good."

The more we drink of the milk of the Word, the more we taste God's goodness. That is, when we get to know God more in His Word, we actually experience and see that he is good and kind. And the more that you taste his goodness, the more you want even more of it! Our longing for His Word actually grows because we are tasting that He is so good.

Advertisers often try to persuade you to drink their drinks or eat their food by pointing to its taste. So they will show amazing pictures of refreshing, tasteful drinks or that picture perfect burger, (which by the way never looks like that when you actually get one). And they do all of this to get you to buy more of their product. And in a sense, Peter is also pointing you to the taste of Scripture because when you get to know God, you get to know His goodness. He's saying, "Crave more of the experience of the Lord that you have already tasted is so good." You have tasted of the Lord's goodness in the Bible, so long even more for it!

The more exposed you are to the Word, the more exposed you are to the goodness of God, which makes you want even more exposure to it. And so it works in our lives like this, where we start to think, “I have heard of his great and glorious promises. I have heard of his grace, kindness, and love, and I can’t help but keep hearing and learning more!”

Have you tasted that the Lord is good? Then long even more for it! You will keep seeing His goodness everywhere you turn.

If you haven’t tasted the goodness of the Lord in salvation, then I encourage you like the Psalmist to “taste and see that the Lord is good!” Realize that you are dead in your sin, without any way to merit salvation on your own. Realize that your sin against a holy God deserves eternal punishment. But know that Christ came to this earth and died on the Cross to pay for your sins, and rose again proving that the sacrifice was accomplished and accepted by the Father, and he did all of this so that He would be the way to be saved. So turn from your sins and trust in Him, and the Bible says that you *will* be saved. What greater good news is there? His goodness is displayed on the Cross for all to see. But will you taste and see that the Lord is good?

What an amazing passage, which shows us the basics of spiritual growth, and what is it?

**Spiritual growth comes from your intake of the Word, so long for more of it!**

Long for more of the Word! It’s so very important. We should be craving it like newborns. But how do we grow in this longing? By putting off sin, recognizing our need for it, and by tasting more and more the goodness of God found in it.

So how are you doing with your desire for the Bible? Have you been longing for other things instead? Have you been looking to science, philosophy, the world’s thoughts, or any other avenue that promises truth? That won’t grow you spiritually, only God’s Word will do! Have you been neglecting Scripture to the detriment of your spiritual growth? You can’t expect to grow unless the Word has a vital place in your nourishment, so drink up!

If a newborn baby didn’t cry out in longing for milk, we would take them to the doctor because there would be something seriously wrong. So we need to cry out in longing for more and more pure spiritual milk. Be in your Bible every day! Do a one-on-one Bible study with another person in the church. Be willing to consistently be under the teaching and preaching of the Word at our weekly services. Long for more and more, whenever possible.

Everyday we should be craving the truth, craving to once again taste God’s goodness, and everyday wondering, “What does God have to say?” This is our food! This is our nourishment!

*\*The sermon actually spoken may be slightly different than the sermon manuscript.\**