

CCI I Peter 2: 1-10

Peter wrote this letter to churches filled with new converts to faith in Jesus that were spread throughout the Roman empire. Peter wrote to encourage them to keep growing in faith and stay faithful during the difficult times of persecution they were facing. There is a lot that could be unpacked in Peter's words, but for time's sake, I want to focus in on two of the metaphors Peter used to describe how to be faithful followers of Jesus.

Peter starts with 5 attitudes that we are to get rid of. Not put in a box and store in the garage because they may come in handy again someday, but to dump them. What were they? *Malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.* The term, "get rid of," was used for stripping off filthy clothes. Becoming a Christian means changing our wardrobe. These five attitudes went out of style when you became a follower of Christ.

SLIDE Malice is a desire to hurt someone with words or deeds. Sniping or letting someone have it because we're irritated or inconvenienced. Being meanspirited.

The word deceit really means to "bait the hook." It's what we do when we play a trick to get our way. To deliberately tell a lie or leave out the truth.

The word hypocrisy comes from the Greek theater when actors would put on a mask and play a part on the stage. A hypocrite pretends to be something they are not. Saying one thing to your face and another thing to everyone else. Blaming others for the way they feel instead of owning their own feelings. Being obviously upset by their body language, but when asked what's wrong, saying "Oh... nothing."

Envy is jealousy at the success of others or happiness at another's misfortune. It is an ugly poison of the soul that strips us of joy and gratitude for we already have. Envy often leads to the last action to get rid of: slander.

The term slander translates a Greek word that literally means to "speak down" about someone. It includes gossip, taking cheap shots, using humor to hurt others, disparaging comments, unkind words, judging others unfairly, and putting others down.

Peter gives us the excellent reason to put these in the trash like filthy, unwashable clothing: because we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good. If we have experienced God's amazing grace in response to our own worst sins and weaknesses, if we have seen God's goodness in our lives that we know we do not deserve, if we have tasted moments of sheer joy in the Spirit, how can we treat

others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ, with their weaknesses or sins with malice, envy, slander, deceit, or hypocrisy? Peter says when we do, it's clear we've forgotten how good the Lord is to us.

Peter then uses two metaphors to describe how we should live instead.

SLIDE Be like newborn babies. No, this doesn't mean to make messes and expect someone else to clean up after you, to sleep when there is work to do, to require constant attention in order to feel happy, or to cry and scream when those around us don't keep us happy! That is what babies are like. Peter focuses on one aspect of newborn babies: newborn babies crave milk. They want to eat every 2-4 hours. Without regular feedings, newborns don't grow. The same is true of us as Christians. Without nourishment for our spiritual life, we don't grow either. And we fall into habits, like envying people, slandering others, that are not worthy of our calling.

Like newborn babies crave mother's milk, we are to crave the nourishment of our souls that will help us grow in our salvation. Growing in our salvation is a unique phrase. Many people think that being saved is a one-time event that is completed the moment we believe in Jesus Christ. The Greek word for salvation comes from the word *sozo* which we translate in some places saved and in other places healed. **SLIDE** *Sozo* has the image of something that has been broken or damaged that is made whole again. Just like babies, our being made whole, being saved, takes time. Salvation is a lifelong process that begins with faith, is nurtured throughout our lives, and is finally completed as we enter eternity. Paul said it like this in Philippians: **SLIDE**

"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence, but

now much more in my absence--continue to work out your salvation with fear and

trembling."

Salvation is something to be worked out, something we learn how to put into practice- not in order to **be saved**, but to continue to be made whole in more and more areas of our lives. So Peter says to grow in our salvation. Faith is a journey of spiritual growth as we learn to live the ways of Christ and get rid of the things in our lives that do not reflect Christ, like hypocrisy, envy, deceit, slander, and malice.

One of the saddest descriptions of the church I've read was written by a young Lutheran pastor. In his experience, kids learn about the faith in Sunday School until their parents get tired of getting everyone ready for Sunday School,

and then kids are back in classes for a few weeks for confirmation when they are 13, but then they drop out of the church as soon as they can. Then they often return to the church as young adults with families and they are welcomed back and even put in leadership roles. Unfortunately, they often haven't grown spiritually since confirmation and they return to church with a 13 year old's understanding of God and faith. Is this true about us?

SLIDE Now let's look at Peter's second metaphor: stones. Peter describes Christ as the Living Stone (capital S) and us as living stones (small s). A living stone is an interesting metaphor since stones have no life in them. They are solid and firm and were used to build temples and other buildings, many of which are still standing after 2000 years. The image of the stone in scripture describes something that is everlasting, and trustworthy. God is called the Rock of our salvation in the Psalms. Jesus taught his disciples that wise people build their lives on the rock instead of sand. So Christ is called the solid, trustworthy Living Stone we can build our lives on.

SLIDE The believers Peter was writing to had spent their lives believing in dead stone statues as gods, had offered sacrifices and prayed for help all to dead stone statues. Since they had now come to Christ, the true and risen-from-the-dead Living Stone who is building a spiritual house, they were to take their place as living stones that Christ can build with. It's part of growing in our salvation.

Consider the process for building a wall of stones. **SLIDE** The builder places the stones near each other in an order that makes their edges fit together. It may take some time to move them into the best places for the benefit of the wall. Sometimes two stones will be moved closer together, other times farther apart.

SLIDE Sometimes, a stone will get cut to fill a space. **SLIDE** Each layer is different because the builder adapts to accommodate the differences in the stones. Stones are pounded into place, that's no fun. They are all connected with mortar to hold them together. Layer after layer of stones built on the other layers. **SLIDE** It's how God has been building his spiritual house beginning with Jesus - stone on stone, layer on layer- adapting to changing times and different stones, yet all connected by the Spirit. **SLIDE** What's our role as living stones? To let God choose our place in the wall and then work there, to be willing to be moved over a bit so other stones can find their places too, to be willing to have God chip off something precious to us because it's hindering his plan for growing the wall in a new direction, to stay connected in the Spirit even when the other stones have rough edges that irritate us, and God's spiritual house continues to grow.

SLIDE Oh, it's easier to be a solitary stone- you don't get crushed by the other stones, you don't find yourself carrying more weight while others coast along, you don't get rubbed the wrong way by some cranky stone with a rough edge, no one asks you to fill in some space in the building where the fit isn't quite right, and you can enjoy sitting around in the sun while the other stones do the work. But solitary stones sitting in the sun eventually become just stones in the grass- not part of what God is building. It is in the serving and finding our place together, that God's spiritual house grows, and friends, like it or not, it is how we grow up in our salvation too. I have found that no one truly grows up in their faith without rubbing shoulders with the other stones. And when the church works right, when the stones support one another through tragedy and sorrow, celebrate together during victories, work together to serve people's needs, and continually make room for more stones, there is nothing like it.

I invite you to take out your stone. It's just a rock, but we aren't. We are called to be living stones (small s) following Christ the Living Stone (capital S). As we reflect on our walk with God this Lent, are we growing up in our salvation, or are we trying to live with a 13-year-old's understanding of God and faith because we left learning behind years ago? Lent is a good time to start growing in faith again.

SLIDE As we feel the rough edges of our stones, they remind us that God is not done working in us, we all still have rough edges. We all still put on those dirty clothes of envy and deceit and hypocrisy and malice and slander. We all need to get rid of attitudes that are not worthy of our calling as followers of Christ. We all still need grace and forgiveness, and we all still need to forgive and extend grace. It's part of being living stones who are learning to grow up in our salvation. The best place to let God smooth out our rough edges is as living stones busy living out our place of service. Each of us is different so there are different ways to serve, different points of view, and different needs, but there is a place for every living stone. Are we living stones or just stones gathering moss? Are we living stones willing to move over, to make room for new living stones beside us? Are we clinging to something that gets in the way of God building his house in a new direction? Will we let go?

We're going to have a time of silent prayer where we can talk with God about these very questions and then as we sing the hymn of response, if you're ready to take your place of service as a living stone, I invite you to bring your very rough stone forward and place it at the foot of the cross. Don't be afraid that it's

rough, because they're all rough. And if you dare, put it right next to another rough stone because that's where you'll grow the most.