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BE SUCH A BABY

1 Peter 1:17-2:3

Alexa Bjornson’s son, Landon, is on the autism spectrum. Alexa is divorced from Landon’s father, but she took Landon on the plane several times from their home in Las Vegas to Portland so he could spend time with his dad. However, after a number of these trips there came a time when Landon was going to make the trip on the plane by himself. Alexa was nervous about this. One of her concerns was that Landon can at times be perceived as an annoyance by other people. So she sent a note along with her son explaining the situation, asking whoever might encounter him to show him kindness. She attached $10 for any inconvenience Landon might cause and her cell phone number if there was a problem. After Landon’s flight landed in Portland she received a text message. It was from a passenger named Ben Pedraza. He said, “I was Landon’s seat neighbor for his flight to Portland. He did ask if we were there yet several times, but he was a great travel buddy. He’s a great kid, and you’re a lucky mom.” He included a selfie of himself with Landon, and he said he would be donating the $10 to the Autism Society. In a Facebook post that has been shared over 130,000 times Alexa said, “I was so relieved. There are good humans on the planet that make Landon feel like it’s okay to be himself and not make him feel like he is an annoyance.”

In a Huffington Post article Taylor Pittman told the story of a woman who was at the hospital with her 9 week old son. It was a tough day. When she came out of the hospital that evening she discovered a parking ticket on her car. Just what she needed on a day like that. When you have a child in the hospital it is a really bad day. But attached to the ticket was payment for the ticket and a note from a stranger that said, “I saw your car had a parking ticket. I’m sure whatever you are going through at the hospital is tough enough, so I have paid it for you. Hope things get better.”

Debbie and Shaun Riddle went to the West Side Café in Fort Worth, Texas, to have lunch. They are regulars at the café, and their waitress, 21 year old Kayla Lane, remembered them from a previous visit. She asked the young couple, “Didn’t you have a baby with you last time you were here?” They sadly and quietly told her that their baby had died in his sleep. When they finished their meal, instead of a check they received a note that said, “Your bill has been paid. We are terribly sorry for your loss. God bless.” It was signed, “The West Side.” The Riddles posted this on Facebook, and the story went viral. A manager at the restaurant was interviewed on TV and he said it actually was Kayla herself who paid the bill out of her own pocket.

Imagine a world where those kinds of stories weren’t considered newsworthy because they were the norm. They were just the normal way that people behaved all the time. It would be a world where kindness isn’t noteworthy because it is how everyone always acts all the time. They wouldn’t commit a few random acts of kindness, rather, they’d be continually so kind that there would be no reason for anyone to have a bumper sticker encouraging random acts of kindness. We’ve seen that Peter says followers of Jesus are aliens in this world. Our home is another world. It is the kingdom of God. Our true home is that world we just imagined. It is a place where kindness isn’t just common, it is the rule. It is how people are all the time. That place is not this world. Consider that here one person being kind and patient with a young man who can be a little annoying at times is such big news that it reaches 130,000 people. That tells you a lot about this world.

We saw last week that those who believe in Jesus are called to be holy because God is holy. God’s kingdom is a holy kingdom. We saw a bit of what it means to be holy last week. Holiness is not dull, boring, stiff, stuffy and unappealing. It is beautiful and awe-inspiring. In the verses we look at today we are going to expand on that thought. We are going to see what holy living looks like. We are going to learn that this life is what we are called to. And we will see that we have motivation for pursuing this life. Let’s look at 1 Peter 1:17-2:3

WE HAVE REASON TO BE LIKE BABIES

How often have you heard someone say, “Don’t be such a baby”? That usually happens when a person they are speaking to is whining or complaining or expressing pity for themselves. Oh, don’t be such a baby. We say that because babies cry a lot. New born babies sleep, eat, and cry. That sums up most of their activity.

Peter surprises us when he says just the opposite of “don’t be such a baby.” He says “be such a baby.” Thus the sermon titled Be Such A Baby. He tells us in 2:2 that we should be like new born babies. However, he doesn’t mean we should mirror their actions and just eat, sleep and cry. He had one thing in particular in mind. He wants us to crave pure “spiritual milk” the way a baby craves milk.

There’s a baby in our family. Little Bria is now 3 months old. I can verify that she craves milk. I’ve seen Laurie pick her up and hold her when its near feeding time. Bria turns her head and opens her mouth trying to find the spigot for the milk. Laurie informs her that she’s looking at a dry hole on the milk front. When she doesn’t get the milk she craves she lets the world know about it. She really, really wants that milk. Nothing else will suffice. Hey, Bria, how about a banana? Not interested. Maybe a taco? Nope. Only the milk will do.

What did Peter mean when he told us to crave pure spiritual milk? Scholars debate the exact significance. Some say that milk is what enables a baby to grow, so the milk that makes us grow spiritually is the gospel or possibly sound teaching of the Word of God. That seems reasonable given that Peter says we should long for this milk so that we might grow up in our salvation. However, when we interpret the Bible, as with any writing, context is crucially important. There is no mention of the gospel as spiritual milk or of sound teaching in this passage. We need to ask what Peter was urging in this context because this instruction clearly must be related to it since there is no transition to another topic. What was Peter urging his readers to be and to do?

In 1:16 he had said we should be holy. In verse 17 he said we should live out our days in reverent fear, meaning in awe of God. In 1:22 he said we should have sincere love for others. In 2:1 he said we should get rid of all malice, deceit and other negative actions and attitudes. The context is all about how we live. I think this holy kind of life is the pure milk he had in mind. Peter talked about growing in our salvation, but we need to remember that salvation means more than going to heaven when we die. We are saved to a new kind of life. In Christ we are given a whole new life, one that is eternal, but that eternal life is of a different quality. It is a life of joy, freedom, peace and love. It is also a holy life, one that begins more and more to look like the life to the full that Jesus said he came to bring us. So here he is telling us to crave living more and more that kind of life.

So craving the milk Peter had in mind, I believe, was desiring and pursuing the kind of life that he had been describing since 1:16, which we will consider shortly. We should be craving that life like a baby craves milk, rather than living the way the world around us lives and encourages us to live.

Why should we want that life? After all, it is an alien life. Doing what Peter tells us to do is going to cause us to be out of step with the world. The world won’t understand it, and what it doesn’t understand it reacts against. Furthermore, this kind of life landed Jesus on a cross, and it is certain to be difficult for us as well. It means people might take advantage of us, might even despise us. So why do it?

Peter says we should do this “Now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.” The reason we would pursue and crave this kind of life with all of its potential difficulties, is that we have discovered that God, the one who gives us this new life and encourages us to live it, is good.

By far the hardest time of Laurie’s and my life was when we had a son born with a heart defect. He lived for a few months and then died, crushing all our hopes and making our many fervent prayers for him seem useless. We had to face a number of very difficult questions as a result of that. For me, one of them was, can I believe that God really is good? What happened to our son, and to us, was not good in any way. The Bible asserts on many occasions that God is good. But what he let happen to us was terrible.

I struggled with this question for some time. That experience was a life changing period for both Laurie and me. One of the things that came out of it for me was a truth that few like to face. Most just don’t believe it. The truth is, **one cannot judge the goodness of God by one’s circumstances**. Because we live in a world seriously distorted by evil and because we cannot see what God is doing in his eternal wisdom and plan, there will be times when his goodness feels totally absent in our situation. You can ask Job about that one. I realized that my trust in God’s goodness could not be founded on my circumstances, but upon his truth, upon what he has done for us in Christ, and on how he has been good in the past. There will be moments for all of us when believing in God’s goodness will be an act of total faith that runs contrary to what we are feeling.

We have to ask, when Peter said that his first century readers had tasted God’s goodness, was it because what was happening in their lives was so wonderful? The answer is a resounding no. As I have already said, one of the themes of this book is suffering. Peter has already said in 1:6 they were suffering “grief in all kinds of trials.” Later in the book he will describe their lives as a “fiery ordeal.” Life was brutally difficult for these people. Coming to know God, putting their faith in Jesus, had not brought a flood of physical blessings and good circumstances into their lives. Quite the opposite, it had made their lives more difficult. So the goodness of God that they tasted was found in something other than their current situation.

How then did they experience the goodness of God? Peter says he redeemed us from the empty way of life that was passed down to us not with perishable things like gold and silver, but with the most precious thing of all, the blood of Jesus Christ. By putting faith in Jesus Christ we are given the most costly, the most precious thing one could ever have. We are forgiven of everything, we are connected to God and loved by him unconditionally, we have eternal life, and are given a whole new life in this world. We were redeemed from an empty way of life. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the Bible, he says God redeemed us from a dead end, empty headed life. That’s a good description.

It is a dead end life because it is futile. You live this life and think you’re going somewhere only to discover the road goes nowhere. Every human being wants to do 2 things. First, make their life as full as possible, including making it meaningful. Life will never be full if it is, as our culture claims, meaningless. Second, they don’t want life to end. They want to make it last forever. They want to have the certain hope that they will continue beyond the grave.

The old life in line with our world is a dead end because it doesn’t accomplish either of those things. It can’t have meaning, and it doesn’t produce a full life, and of course, it doesn’t provide eternal life either. In fact, it insists that life is devoid of both meaning and hope because there is no life after death.

Before he committed suicide, Chester Bennington, the lead singer of the band Linkin Park, said in an interview, “I always find myself struggling with certain patterns of behavior…I find myself stuck in the same thing that keeps repeating over and over again, and I’m just like, how did I end up here?” He then pointed to his head and said, “This place right here, that is a bad neighborhood.”

He was an extreme case, but that’s a reminder of the futility of the dead end life that Peter said they were saved from. We are saved from it in Christ. To say that way of life is empty headed sounds judgmental and critical, but look at what that life does to people. Writer John Horgan had an article in *Scientific American* in November that spoke to this reality. He points out that a lot of scientists espouse the materialistic world view that all that exists is physical matter and that we are here totally by chance, thus there is no meaning to our lives, and of course, when we die we cease to exist forever. This causes them to ask what happens when humans are no more. “Our works of science, mathematics, philosophy, art, music… will slip back into the void whence they came. Everything we have thought and done will be for naught.” This is an unbearable conclusion, so some try to find a way out. Physicist Leonard Susskind contends the entire universe will ultimately collapse in on itself and be destroyed, and only some black holes will remain. He says all information and memory of humans will be preserved in the outer membrane of a black hole! He even says that maybe some aliens with god like powers could possibly reconstruct the lives of every person who has ever lived. Um, what now? This is a highly intelligent man, one smarter than me, but doesn’t that sound a trifle empty headed to you? Our lives recorded on the membrane of black holes, and some day being reconstructed by god like aliens? Sounds like somebody is desperately grasping at straws, straws that require enormous faith.

In these verses Peter says all people are like grass and they’re glory is like the flowers of the fields. Last year we had a lot of rain, and as a result in the spring the wildflowers were spectacular. People flocked out to the rural areas to see the glorious display of colors. How long did that last? A few weeks. Peter reminds us, as if we needed reminding, that we are like that. Here for a brief moment and then it’s over. But in Christ we have been born again, given a new life, one that is not fleeting, but is imperishable, permanent, eternal. That is how we know God is good.

We have been saved from that to a life where we are connected to God. We know him. We have him as our Father who loves us. So our lives can be, as we saw earlier, full of joy. They are loaded with meaning, for everything we are and do means something eternal. We have a future that is certain and imperishable. And all this has been accomplished for us not by silver or gold, precious, but perishable things, but by the blood of Jesus Christ. There is no human measure of how precious that sacrifice was. This is how we know the goodness of God.

If you had asked me when I was young to chart how I wanted my life to go, I can guarantee you that what I’ve actually lived is not it. Some of the most important things actually have been better than I would have even hoped, but there have also been parts where the goodness of God seemed absent. The sum of the whole thing is not impressive. But I know for certain I have tasted the goodness of God. There have been blessings beyond my dreams, but more important, it has been and continues to be a life filled with God’s presence, his will, his wisdom, his love and his hope. It is full of his peace, full of significance and meaning, and loaded with his joy. It is a life I could never have had without the goodness of God. Because God has been so good to us, it only makes sense that we want to respond. By living as he desires we will gain more experience of his goodness. We will experience fullness of life. So we have every reason to crave the life that he has saved us to out of an old way of life that was an empty headed, dead end.

WE SHOULD STRETCH OUT IN FEAR

So, uh, Rick, you’re saying what we should do because we have tasted that God is good is stretch? God thinks it’s important that we have good flexibility? We should be afraid that God is going to get us if we’re not limber enough? No, that’s not what I mean. Not even close. Stay with me and you’ll get what I mean. It’s fine if you stretch. That’s a good thing. But it’s not a God thing.

Let’s talk about the “in fear” part. That comes from verse 17 where Peter says, “Live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.” The word “reverent” was added by the translators to help us get the sense of Peter’s words. He literally told us to live in fear. The Greek word is *phobos*, from which we get phobia. The original Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes 5:7 says we should “fear God.” It is translated “stand in awe of God.” That’s really what Peter was aiming at. We should live our lives in awe.

We should be in awe of who God is, but also in awe of what he has done for us and what he has given us. We have seen that in the following verses Peter tells us about the profound gift of life God has given us and of the enormous cost of it. One old movie I liked was *National Treasure*. In it at one point, the main character, played by Nicholas Cage, and his friends pull off an elaborate heist, stealing the Declaration of Independence from the National Archives. They did it to protect it because some criminals were out to steal it. But I remember the respect, the reverence, the characters showed for this precious document. It is a holy thing, worthy of the utmost respect and careful treatment. Peter is telling us that we have a holy thing given us by a holy God, and we should treat it with that kind of respect and reverence. Every day of our lives is a holy thing, infused with eternal significance and holy grace.

On Thursday I went out to bring our trash cans in because Thursday is trash day in our neighborhood. As I finished, Michael, who lives across the street, was out walking his two young children. I stopped and talked with him for several minutes. Those were holy minutes. They were a gift from God. Nothing dramatic happened in that conversation. Part of it was about baseball because we have a little friendly rivalry since he’s an avid Dodger fan and I’m a Padre fan. Just taking time to talk, express interest in him, listen to him, care about him, was a holy act, full of eternal significance, because every time we care for others, every time we love them it is a holy moment fraught with eternal meaning.

Last night we had a birthday party for our son, Toby. Most of our family was able to be there except for Michael, who had to work. He was flying to Panama City. At one point after dinner I was in the backyard with Ella, Cara and Wesley. All the other adults were inside talking and I was playing “I’m going to catch you” with the 3 little kids, running all around the yard. I wasn’t doing it to get something for me. I was just loving those kids. It was a holy moment. As I talk to you this morning we have a small group viewed by the world as totally insignificant. It sees our little gathering as a joke. But this is not insignificant. It is holy, a gift from God, and loaded with eternal meaning.

What will that mean to live a holy life full of reverence? It is doing what we looked at last week. Being holy because our God is holy and has given us a holy gift. Yes, but what specifically is that going to mean? Peter spells it out for us in verse 22. “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.”

We looked not long ago at what it means to love sincerely, without ulterior motives or in pretense. Peter tells us to love for real, from the heart. He also tells us we are to love deeply. Other translations have that we should love fervently or earnestly. But I think there is another word that comes closer to Peter’s meaning. The Greek word translated “deeply” was from a Greek word that meant to “stretch out.” Ah, so this is where the idea of stretching came from. Right. But it didn’t mean stretch out on a hammock and relax, nor did it mean stretch to become more flexible. It was a vigorous word that had the connotation of straining. I think a good way to translate this would be “love one another strenuously.” He’s telling us to work at it, to go outside our convenience zone, to strain in our efforts to love one another.

One scholar said this word means “extend to the limit.” Go to the max in your efforts to love others. Laurie and I were at Toby and Anna’s house a couple of months ago and Toby asked if I could give him a hand. They had some new vanities for their master bedroom that were in boxes in the garage. Toby wanted to move them upstairs, but they were too big and heavy for one person. I told him that of course I would help him move them. I didn’t know what I was agreeing to. As soon as we started moving that first box I realized I might be in trouble. It took everything I had to get that thing into the house and to the foot of the stairs. I had to take a couple of breaks just to get it that far. Now we were looking at carrying it up the stairs. After a break we started in. I was using all my strength to just nudge that thing up stairs one at a time. I was straining with all my might, but it was becoming apparent that there was the distinct possibility that we weren’t going to make it. It so happened that there were a couple of guys working on some other projects in their house that day. One of them evidently was afraid that the old man was going to have a heart attack and die right there on the stairs. He said, “Here, let me take over.” It was a bit humiliating because in a couple of minutes they had that vanity up the stairs and into the bathroom, then they went and got the other one and moved it up too.

That was an example of a bit of love as that man came to my rescue, but what I want you to think about was how hard I was straining to move that thing. I was giving every ounce of strength I had. I was extending to the limit. That is how Peter said we should love others.

This is what it means to live in fear and to seek to be holy. It is not a negative command, one that says you are holy because you don’t do all these things on the naughty list. It says you are holy when you expend yourself in the effort to love other people, when you put them before yourself and your own interest.

NPR had a story not long ago of a 31 year old man named Julio Diaz who lives in the Bronx. One evening at the end of a long day at work he got off the subway train intending to head for his favorite diner. But he was confronted on the subway platform by a teenager who threatened him with a knife and demanded his wallet. Diaz figured his life was way more important than his wallet, so he pulled the wallet out and handed it to the guy. As the mugger turned to walk away Diaz called out to him, “Hey, if you’re going to be robbing people the rest of the night you should be dressed more warmly. Why don’t you take my coat to keep warm.” The teen was shocked and stopped in his tracks. Diaz said it was obvious he needed money, so keep the wallet, take the coat, and if he was hungry why not come with him to the diner and have a bite to eat. As the two of them ate dinner the teen marveled at how many of the dishwashers, waitresses and others waved at Diaz or stopped to say hello to him. He asked if Diaz was the owner. Diaz laughed and said he wasn’t, but hadn’t he heard that you should be kind to everyone? The young man said, “Yeah, but I didn’t think people actually behaved that way.” When the bill came Diaz said he needed his wallet to pay the bill. The guy handed it to him without thinking twice. Diaz paid the bill and offered the mugger $20. He also asked if he would give him the knife, which he did. That’s stretching out to love another person. That is the kind of life Peter had in mind for us.

In 2:1 Peter shows us some of what that means. “Rid yourself of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind.” Those are the things that are so common and are the opposite of love. This isn’t an exhaustive list. These are some of the things that are part of the old way of living. When a person is committed to serving themselves first these are the kinds of things that will crop up. Peter says put away malice, deceiving people, envying them and speaking ill of them. Those things have no place in this alien life, this holy life, that God has called us to live.

CONCLUSION

John Perkins is an African American, a Christian leader who has spoken about and worked for racial reconciliation. He is a remarkable man. His latest book is *Dream With Me: Race, Love, and the Struggle We Must Win*. In it he wrote about how he grew up poor in New Hebron, Mississippi. He said he had a lot of contact with poor whites. They believed they were better than black people like him just because of their skin color. They expected blacks like him to move out of their way when they were walking down the street. They were oppressors. Many poor whites sought to become sheriffs or cops to have some power over others. He says he and other blacks did not have good relationships with them. He regarded them as redneck, trailer park trash. But he said he has seen those people pick up food at a church that distributes food to the poor. He has seen the shame, the sense of being beaten down, and realized they were also victims. He said that he has gone from hating them when he was young and angry and they were bigoted and violent, to genuinely loving them as brothers and sisters. He says now when he speaks he sees how many poor whites respond to him so positively and he can see a spark in their eyes. He has put away malice. He says, “I’m truly sorry that I’ve neglected the needs of these neighbors of mine and have not responded often enough to that spark.”

We can’t make others live with kindness and love. But we can be light in the darkness. What Peter calls us to do is remember the goodness of God, and on the basis of that goodness to crave this life, this alien life of holiness and love that stretches out to the limit, seeing every moment of our lives, every encounter with other people as holy. What is needed is not random acts of kindness. It is people who are genuinely kind from the heart, and kindness infuses and informs every interaction with other people and every decision they make.

Everyone has a mental image of the life they want to have, the kind of people they want to be. God calls on us to pursue a holy life, stretching out to love other people at every moment. This isn’t something we do to get God to love us or approve of us. It is what we do because we have experienced his goodness, because he already loves us and approves of us even though we don’t deserve it. Because we are deluged with his grace and love, because we have been given a new life, we now live these lives in reverent awe, knowing every moment we live is holy in Christ. This life opens us up to being used or stepped on by others, but it is worth it. It is what we were created to be. It is a life that is full. Last night I wasn’t seeking something for myself last night when I was running around the backyard with a 5 year old a 3 year old and a 1 year old. But in that holy moment I did get something. I got joy.er