

1 Peter 2

“¹Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking...”

This is a good measuring stick for what Christian behavior does NOT look like. In other words, if we are full of malice, then we are not acting like Christians should. If we are deceitful in our words or behavior, then we are not speaking or acting as Christians should, and so for hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking. It is one of several biblical codes of Christian conduct in the New Testament.

Paul also lists a code of Christian conduct in a series of positive terms. He calls it the fruit of the Spirit.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law” (Ephesians 5:22).

“... for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth)” (Ephesians 5:9).

Acquisition of Christian virtues, like all forms of deification, is a process. It has a humble start:

“...² as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby,”

Babies start out with the simplest of food – milk. In the ancient world, not yet having baby formula, this refers to mother’s milk. As the child grows, it can receive more and more complex food, but in the early stages, mother’s milk provides just the right nutrients for an infant, and is extremely simple.

Peter says that new Christians are like babies when it comes to their ability to understand the Word of God. What do you think would be the simple teachings found in the Bible?

Later, as new Christians grow in their knowledge of the Bible, they can understand more and more complex teachings. What teachings in the Bible do you think might be better suited to more spiritually mature Christians?

This gradual growth in spiritual knowledge is precious and highly respected in the Orthodox Church. During the Cherubic hymn in the Liturgy, the Priest prays: “... *Grant also, O God, to those who pray with us, progress in life, faith and spiritual understanding. Grant that they may always worship You with awe and love, to partake of Your Holy Mysteries without guilt or condemnation, and deemed worthy of Your celestial Kingdom.*”

Our Church is blessed with a group of people who specialize in helping our children and young people “... *progress in life, faith and spiritual understanding.*”



We have a robust Catechism program, staffed with dedicated teachers who help our children from kindergarten to high school. In addition, we have Hope and Joy ministries to younger children, and GOYA for junior high and senior high students. These programs are supplemented every summer by Vacation Church school at our parish, and summer camp at the Diakonia Center. For college age students and young adults, we offer Orthodox Christian Fellowship and the Young Adults group in our new “Lighthouse” facility.



For all adults we provide Intro to Orthodoxy class, Bible Studies, and the Spiritual Book Club to foster spiritual growth. For those who wish to develop their spiritual knowledge in college, the Greek Archdiocese offers Hellenic College in Brookline, Massachusetts. For those who seek spiritual knowledge and development at the graduate level, Holy Cross provides graduate degree programs, including those to prepare for the priesthood. All these activities are for those of all ages and abilities who *“desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby... if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.”* This verse may be a paraphrase of Psalm 34:8, *“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; Blessed is the man who trusts in Him!”*

Growth in one's Christian knowledge is vital. We sometimes see people with mental handicaps, which sadly prevent their intellectual development from progressing past childhood.



This is tragic for such a person, and it is just as tragic for Christians who never develop spiritually. The Apostle Paul scolded the Christians in Corinth using the same metaphor of milk that Peter used:

“I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able...” (1 Corinthians 3:2).

The book of Hebrews also laments the state of a Christian who is stuck in spiritual childhood:

“For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe” (Hebrews 5:13).

To borrow a famous phrase, “A Christian mind is a terrible thing to waste.” But for those who develop their minds and souls, there is great gain.

“⁴ Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious...”

In the book of Revelation, St. John was granted a vision of Christ, gloriously reigning in heaven. That vision describes Christ's appearance, comparing it to precious stones:

“² Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne. ³And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald” (Revelation 4).

Gems not only glorify the reigning Christ, but they also glorify his beloved Church. 1 Peter says,

“⁵ you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house...”

This is also described in the book of Revelation:

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“⁹ Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, “Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife.”

¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, ¹¹ having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal.”

The jewels that adorn Christ, as well as the members of His Church, also beautify heaven itself.

“⁵ you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house...”

John describes the dazzling gems of heaven in Revelation 21:

“¹⁸ The construction of its wall was of jasper; and the city was pure gold, like clear glass.

¹⁹ The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all kinds of precious stones: the first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald,

²⁰ the fifth sardonyx, the sixth sardius, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. ²¹ The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.”

The exalted Church is not only richly jeweled, it also performs a holy function. 1 Peter 2:5 calls the Church, *“...a holy priesthood...”* Four verses later, Peter says of the Church, *“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light...”*;

Priests are primarily intercessors between God and humanity. These intercessions took the form of offering prayers and offering sacrifices. Priests offered prayers and sacrifices to their gods and goddesses in all the ancient cultures, some long before Judaism. This was also the duty of the ancient Jewish priests. They offered prayers, praises and sacrifices to God in the Temple around the clock. The priesthood continues in the Orthodox Church today, and the function of the priests is still the same: to pray and offer sacrifices. We see this in the Liturgy. During the Cherubic Hymn, the priest prays:

“We give thanks You, O Lord God of hosts, who has made us worthy to stand even now before Your holy altar of sacrifice, and to fall down before You, seeking Your compassion for our sins and those committed in ignorance by the people. Accept, O God, our supplication. Make us worthy to offer You prayers, supplications, and bloodless sacrifices for all Your people.”

This priestly function is not only fulfilled by the clergy. The laity, as a community, also perform a priestly function in their prayers and praises. This passage in 1 Peter recognizes the priesthood of the entire Church:

“...His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light...to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

The laity that prays and praises is offering a priestly sacrifice; *“A mercy of peace, a sacrifice of praise.”*

“⁶ Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture,

*‘Behold, I lay in Zion
A chief cornerstone, elect, precious,
And he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.’*

⁷ Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient,

*‘The stone which the builders rejected
Has become the chief cornerstone,’*

⁸ and

*‘A stone of stumbling
And a rock of offense.’”*

This is a quote of Psalm 118: 21-23, and it quoted several times in the New Testament. Christ applied this same quote to Himself: *“Have you not even read this Scripture: ‘The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone’ (Mark 12:10). Peter quoted it in his defense before the Sanhedrin: “¹¹ This is the ‘stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone’” (Acts 4). In all these quotes, the message is the same: Christ came to his countrymen, but they rejected him. Now, He is the foundation of God’s new people, the Church.*

“¹¹ Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims,...”

This is the second time that Peter calls his readers “pilgrims.” The first was in verse 1 of the Epistle, *“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the pilgrims of the Dispersion...”* Detachment from our place in the world is a point of emphasis.

“...abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, ¹² having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.”

We have already seen that Peter is preparing his Christian readers for coming persecution. Part of that persecution is being defamed by our persecutors. This was the case of Christ during His passion. *“They began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man subverting our nation, forbidding us to pay the tribute tax to Caesar and claiming that he himself is Christ, a king”” (Luke 23:5). These lies were examined by Pilate, who also observed Christ’s*

demeanor. Pilate concluded: *“You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. When I examined him before you, I did not find this man guilty of anything you accused him of doing”* (Luke 23:14.)

In writing his Epistle, Peter knew that the coming persecution would come from the powerful Roman state. Therefore, it is amazing that Peter directed his Christian readers to submit to the authority of a government that he knew to be thoroughly pagan, grossly immoral, and immensely cruel.

“¹³ Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men...”

Paul wrote similarly: *“Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴ For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil”* (Romans 13).

Peter and Paul understood that, although the Roman government and society was largely sick, there were many in positions of Roman authority who helped the Christians (the centurion who told Christ, “I am not worthy for you to come unto my roof”; the centurion who witnessed Christ’s death and said “Truly this man was the Son of God!”; Cornelius the centurion, *“a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel...”*; Julius the centurion, who saved Paul from being killed by other Roman soldiers, etc.

Christ came to save human souls. He never politically rebelled against the government authorities, even when they were about to crucify him. Peter and Paul directed Christians not to be political revolutionaries, even when the government was largely evil.

“¹⁶ as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. ¹⁷ Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.”

One of the many abhorrent aspects of the Roman Empire was its rampant practice of slavery.

“Scholars estimate about 10% (but possibly up to 20%) of the Roman empire's population were enslaved. This would mean, for an estimated Roman empire population of 50 million (in the first century AD) between five and ten million were enslaved.”

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/nero-man-behind-myth/slavery-ancient-rome>

Many early Christians were slaves, such as Onesimus, who features prominently in the book of Philemon. Despite the fact that that Onesimus was a slave, Paul calls him a “beloved brother” (Colossians 4:9) and “my son” (Philemon 1:10). The institution of

slavery was practiced in 1st century Rome, but not within the Christian Church. Yet, for those Christians that had to live in bondage, Peter gives advice based on the example of Christ:

“¹⁸ Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. ¹⁹ For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. ²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. ²¹ For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps...”

Peter teaches us that innocent suffering, borne patiently, produces great spiritual reward. It is based on Christ’s example:

*“²² Who committed no sin,
Nor was deceit found in His mouth”;*

This is a reference from Isaiah 53, a prophecy of Christ’s suffering:

*“He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He opened not His mouth;
He was led as a lamb to the slaughter,
And as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
So He opened not His mouth.”*

“²³ who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously;”

Christian slaves should follow the example of Christ, and not use the injustice of their enslavement as an excuse to engage in evil behavior.

“²⁴ who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. ²⁵ For you were like sheep going astray...”

This is another reference to Isaiah 53:

*“⁵ But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed.
⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”*

“...but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

Christ called himself a “shepherd”:

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep” (John 10-11).

“I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own” (John 10:14).

The Greek word translated into the English word “overseer” here is “episkopos.” That is a very literal translation. It is combination of the word “Epi” which means “over” or “above” and “skopos” which means “to watch, tend to, consider.” This is the same word which is usually translated into English as “bishop.” The verse could have been translated calling Christ “the Bishop of our souls.”