

## “100% Pure—or Less Than That?”

1 Peter 2:1–10

January 18, 2026

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The word “Christian” comes from Greek and means “one who belongs to Christ.” To belong to Christ does not mean merely to bear the name; rather, it should mean listening to His voice, obeying His teaching, and even taking up one’s own cross and walking with Him. And yet, when we look at the church today, we often hear the observation that we may have gradually distanced ourselves from this original meaning. That is, instead of being people who live by faith, Christians may have become what might be called “cultural Christians”—people who place themselves within Christian culture and live their daily lives with blurred contours.

Certainly, Easter and Christmas are carefully observed. However, when we ask whether more fundamental matters—listening seriously to Christ’s teaching and living while bearing one’s own cross—are truly placed at the center of our actual lives, it may be difficult to say that they are. There seems to be such a reality among us.

This morning, as we look at the words of 1 Peter chapter 2, we will learn about “listening to and obeying the teaching of Christ,” which forms the foundation of the Christian life. In particular, I would like us to focus on what kind of posture, and with what kind of heart, such obedience should be practiced.

Now, let us briefly consider the background of this letter. Peter’s letter was addressed to various churches scattered throughout what is now the region of Turkey in the first century. They had come to know Christ and seemed to be filled with the “joy” of the gospel and overflowing with hope. It would not be wrong to say that they were close to what Christians ought to be.

At the same time, however, there was also a sense in which they were still immature. Their faith had only just begun to sprout, and it had not yet reached a stable stage. Precisely for that reason, Peter felt the need to teach them patiently through this letter. In order to reach salvation, it was not enough for them to be satisfied with their present level; they needed to reach a higher level.

### **Verses 1–2**

**1 Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander,  
2 like newborn babies, long for the pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow toward salvation.**

In verse 1 we are taught what must be put away, and in verse 2 we are instructed, after putting those things away, to long for the spiritual milk.

First, regarding the content that is to be put away in this one verse, it is worth noting that most of it deals with inward matters. People tend to focus more on visible “actions” than on what is internal. The

reasoning is that, whatever the inner state may be, as long as one does not do bad things in one's actions, it is sufficient. However, here such reasoning is not permitted.

Now, regarding the specific contents of that verse, the term "malice" is the most comprehensive expression, and from there it is followed by three items: "deceit," "hypocrisy," and "envy." These three, so to speak, refer to a discrepancy between a person's inner state and that person's actions. It means that one must not appear to be seeking God for the sake of making oneself look good, or with envy toward others as the motive.

Finally, among outward actions, Peter mentions "slander," which is the form in which malice most easily becomes visible. Other actions, of course, should also be rejected, but here it is said that even "slander" is not acceptable, and an extremely severe statement is being made.

In the first place, Peter is calling for the abandonment of "malice" itself, which lies behind actions. Therefore, the standard presented here is, overall, an exceedingly high standard.

Moreover, it is said that one must put away all of that inward malice without remainder. If you look once more at verse 1, you will notice that the word "all" appears three times. Accordingly, it means that one must arrive at a state in which there is absolutely no malice at all.

Then, after putting away all inward malice, what is one to do? When we look at verse 2, it says, "Like newborn babies, long for the pure, spiritual milk."

When an infant longs for milk, there is only one motive. There is not the slightest trace of motives such as hypocrisy or envy; there is only the single point that the child instinctively senses that it is necessary for life. In other words, the infant embodies the pure state spoken of in verse 1.

The phrase that follows, "pure, spiritual milk," seems to refer to God's teaching as a whole, beginning with the Word. One might ask whether there is such a thing as impure Scripture, but when a person reads the Word with hypocrisy as the motive, that person rereads the Word in the heart in the manner of the Pharisees. Therefore, for that person, the Word has in effect become a Word mixed with many other things. Here it is taught that this must not be so.

Finally, the purpose is stated: "so that you may grow and attain salvation." This suggests that, at the present stage, salvation has not yet been reached.

Here, I would like to pause and once again reflect on what is being said in verses 1–2. Impure motives easily creep into the learning of God's teaching. Even in the church, do not various motives operate—such as appealing to others that one is an exemplary Christian, justifying one's own faults, or treating learning as a religious work? And as long as even a small amount of such motives exists—even if the motive "I want to grow until I attain salvation" also coexists—the Word becomes distorted for that person and does not lead to salvation.

Then what kind of person is someone who is “doing it right”? At the very least, such a person does not care about the evaluations of others and has no hostility. That person is aware that he or she needs salvation and is desperately seeking it. Such a person listens even to things that are disadvantageous to oneself, honestly admits, “I still do not understand,” without pretending otherwise, and does not try to gain something socially through learning. Rather, such a person is able to accept even shame. In other words, when learning from God’s teaching, this is someone who does not think about others at all, but is fully occupied with pursuing one’s own spiritual need—a person who desperately and earnestly seeks the Word.

Then why must one seek God’s teaching to such an extent?

### **Verse 3**

**“You have surely tasted that the Lord is gracious.”**

Here, the logic is confirmed that, as the natural consequence of having tasted God, one should seek the Word with purity.

In the New Japanese Bible 2017, the phrase is translated as “you have surely tasted,” but it may be better translated as “if indeed you have tasted.” That is, in the original text, it is expressed more as an appeal—“is this not so?”

One more point concerns the phrase translated in the New Japanese Bible 2017 as “the Lord is gracious.” The original word can be translated either as “gracious” or as “rich” or “dense,” and I think the latter fits this context better. In other words, if one has tasted God’s teaching as something truly rich and undeniably good, then one ought to long wholeheartedly for that teaching.

Next, the metaphor shifts from drinking to a metaphor of construction. This time, Christ, who embodies God’s teaching, is spoken of as follows.

### **Verse 4**

**“Come to the Lord, who is a living stone—rejected by people but chosen and precious to God.”**

Here, the truth is taught that attitudes toward Christ are sharply divided. If Christ is a stone, people discard it; yet God chooses that stone. Therefore, going to the Lord means doing something that runs counter to the instincts of fallen humanity.

Here I would like to add a note about the word “rejected.” In the original language, it means “rejected after examination,” not that it was discarded by mistake. Thus, it indicates that Christ was well known and then judged to be unnecessary.

This verse 4 is closely connected with the following verse 5.

### Verse 5

**“You yourselves also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”**

When Christ is called a living stone, it refers to a stone used to build a house. Here it is said that the Christians to whom this letter is addressed have likewise become living stones. This likely means that by beginning to follow God’s teaching, they have at last received life and have begun truly to live.

As people absorb God’s teaching, they grow toward salvation, and as a further result, they become people in whom God’s presence dwells—that is, a “spiritual house.”

Furthermore, from another aspect, it is said that they become a holy priesthood. To put the role of a priest in one phrase, priests offered sacrifices to mediate between humans and God and taught people to become holy. It is said that they will take on such a role in this world.

Next, Peter presents three Old Testament passages as the basis for what he has said in verses 4–5. The first of these is:

### Verse 6

**“For it stands in Scripture: ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a chosen stone, a precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame.’”**

This is a quotation from Isaiah 28:16. In its context, we see the people of Israel feeling secure because they had “made a covenant with death.” As for this “covenant with death,” while it is speculative, it is possible that the priests and prophets of that time had constructed doctrines assuring that disaster would not come upon them. The teachers had promised the people salvation. In any case, what lurked behind that religious term “covenant with death” was, in substance, a salvation that ignored God. It was a religious falsehood and ran contrary to faith.

In response to that situation, Isaiah speaks these words. A “cornerstone” is placed at the corner of a building’s foundation, and it is said that the shape of the building was determined by where that stone was set. This cornerstone pointed to God Himself—that is, Christ—and it is said that the one who trusts in that stone “will never be put to shame.”

Behind this prophecy, which was forced to proclaim, “Not religious doctrines, but Christ who is God,” were religious leaders who spoke nothing but falsehood. They taught complex and intricate religious doctrines, and by causing the people to rely on those complexities, they effectively led the people to lose sight of God. If so, then the “rejected stone” refers to the stone rejected by religious leaders through religious reasoning.

As I mentioned earlier when looking at verses 1–2, listening to God's teaching in a way that lacks purity even slightly is extremely dangerous. The teachers of Israel were precisely such people; they distorted God's teaching and caused people to believe false doctrines. Within the teachers themselves were impure falsehood, hypocrisy, and envy, and these influenced them so that the teaching became distorted. Because they also had aspects of sincerely seeking God in a half-hearted way, they were probably unable to realize that they were wrong. It can be imagined that they were completely unaware of it and were acting with good intentions.

By contrast, if one is convinced with a pure heart that Christ is precious and longs for Him, that is to trust Christ, and such a person, as this word says, will never be put to shame.

Next, there are two quotations concerning those who do not believe. As we read, we must remember that these unbelieving people are also part of the church and refer as well to those who approach God with impure motives. First, verse 7.

### **Verse 7**

**Therefore, this stone is precious to you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “the stone which the builders rejected, this has become the cornerstone,”**

Here Psalm 118:22 is quoted. In its context, the people of Israel are taught the necessity of trusting not in human beings, but in God. Within that context appears this quotation. If we understand that it was the people of Israel who discarded the stone, then we see that even God's own people are capable of rejecting God. Nevertheless, entirely disregarding the actions of the people, that stone became the cornerstone.

What we should further notice is the point that those who discarded God, who is the stone, are said to be “the builders.” In other words, the very people who should have known the stone best were the ones who threw it away. This leads to the conclusion that, in order to recognize Christ, a sense that goes beyond mere human knowledge or wisdom is required.

Finally, there is the quotation in verse 8.

### **Verse 8**

**“And, ‘a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.’ They stumble because they do not obey the word, and to this they were also appointed.”**

This final quotation comes from Isaiah 8:14. There as well, those who stumbled were God's people, Israel. From these three quotations, it appears that, in the eyes of the biblical writers, there were very few people among the nation who truly lived by trusting in God.

Concerning the context of Isaiah from which this quotation is taken: at that time, the southern kingdom of Judah was attempting to respond to the military threats of surrounding nations by forming alliances with

other countries. However, diplomacy and religion were not separable in that era, and it should be understood that religious leaders were also involved in diplomacy. In other words, they believed that “forming an alliance with that nation is God’s will.”

Yet such diplomatic efforts were, in reality, nothing more than evidence that they did not believe God could be trusted. The southern kingdom of Judah was unconsciously rejecting God.

To such a people, God sent a stone. That stone represented Christ and held the possibility of becoming salvation for the people. But if they judged that stone to be unnecessary and discarded it, that judgment became decisive, and the people stumbled and fell. In other words, if they relied on diplomacy rather than on Christ, calamity would come upon the people.

Next, please look at the latter half of the verse. The phrase “They stumble because they do not obey the word” — “do not obey” in the original language carries the sense of insisting on one’s own way even when there has been persuasion. The problem is a stubborn refusal to listen. This can be said to be a way of life completely opposite to longing for God’s teaching like a newborn infant.

And concerning the final phrase, “they were also appointed to this,” it should not be read as meaning that God caused them to stumble. Rather, God knew the stubbornness of their hearts, and even knowing that they would reject Christ if He were given to them, He nevertheless sent Christ and thus allowed them to stumble.

If that is the case, then God leads good people in an even better direction, while those who are evil have their condition made even worse. In other words, God sifts people and clearly divides their positions into two.

Verses 7–8 spoke about those who do not long for Christ, but in verses 9–10 that follow, Peter once again speaks about the Christians to whom he wrote this letter.

### **Verses 9–10**

**9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.**

**10 For you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.**

Verse 9 is closely connected to the words of Exodus 19:6. This refers to the time shortly after Israel had come out of Egypt. The mission given at that time was to become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” However, in the end, Israel failed to fulfill that mission.

By the way, the New Japanese Bible 2017 translates the phrase as “royal priests,” but it may be safer to translate it as “a kingdom of priests.” In fact, in the quoted passage in Exodus, it is translated as “a

kingdom of priests,” which seems more appropriate. That is, it refers to a kingdom composed entirely of priests, and it is not necessary to think that each individual is both a king and a priest.

Thus, what is taught across verses 9–10 is that through three spiritual realities — being holy, being priests, and having come to know God — the church to which the letter is addressed has come to form one people. They have truly become the people of God.

However, just because this is said of them does not mean that their situation allowed for optimism. No one could know what would happen if they did not continue to seek God. Therefore, it can be said that there was considerable tension between God’s expectations and their less-than-ideal reality. Whether they would fulfill their mission and form the people God expected, or whether they would fall away partway through, depended on the church.

The people of Israel, who were likewise chosen and called “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” failed to fulfill that mission and drifted away from God. It can be said that Peter’s readers, living in the era of the New Covenant, were being asked whether they would truly follow Christ.

Now, finally, I would like to move to a summary and application.

When we look back over today’s passage, there was only one command given. It was the command in verse 2: “Like newborn babies, long for the pure, spiritual milk.” If one keeps this command, Christ becomes the cornerstone for that person; but if one does not keep it, Christ becomes a stone of stumbling.

As I have already said, to long “like newborn babies” means to seek God’s teaching in the state described in verse 1: “having put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.” In other words, what is required is an attitude of approaching God’s teaching seriously and with concern only for one’s own salvation. And we must also remember that this is not a recommendation, but a prerequisite for salvation.

Regarding this point, I myself had some shallowness of thinking when I was preparing this sermon. As today’s sermon title, I chose “100% Pure, or Less Than That,” but originally I had considered the title “Purity or Hypocrisy.”

However, I realized that what is being said here is not something so lukewarm, but something far more severe. As you can see if you look at verse 1, this is not a matter of purity outweighing hypocrisy. What Peter is saying is that one must be in a state where there is not even the slightest trace of malice. “All malice, all deceit, hypocrisy and envy, all slander.” If we define purity as a state without impure motives, then what is demanded here is not “a certain degree of purity,” but a state of 100% purity, with all impure motives completely removed. In other words, what is being asked here is whether one is 100% pure, or anything else.

Moreover, 100% purity is not the goal, but merely the starting line for growing into salvation. As written at the end of verse 2, from there one “grows and attains salvation.”

If so, then would it not follow that those who receive Christ as the “cornerstone” are rare, and that many encounter Christ as a “stone of stumbling” and stumble?

Regarding this point, when I read commentaries, all of those I consulted say that those who stumble over the “stone of stumbling” are unbelievers who do not believe in Christ, and that those who receive Christ as the “cornerstone” are Christians in general. But is that really so? Even if we grant that the Christians to whom Peter addressed this letter were exemplary and may have received Christ as the cornerstone, can we say that the church throughout history up to the present has done the same? Can we really say that it possesses 100% purity? Is that not doubtful?

As evidence, first of all, in the Old Testament it was not the Gentiles, but God’s own people who stumbled over the “stone of stumbling.” Therefore, if we apply the New Testament in line with the Old, should we not see that those who stumble by not obeying the word are first and foremost Christians?

Moreover, if those who receive Christ as the cornerstone are those who listen to God’s teaching with purity, is it not far too optimistic to assert that this is the church as a whole? Rather, is it not possible that the church, like Israel, has discarded Christ the cornerstone and is reading Scripture with approaches filled with malice and hypocrisy? In other words, is it not possible that the church has already stumbled over the “stone of stumbling”?

In the end, I think such misunderstanding arises because people imagine that “discarding the stone” must mean something dramatic, such as committing murder or apostasy. In reality, “discarding” is something far more mundane: it is seeking Christ with impure motives and thereby bringing judgment upon oneself. Moreover, because the person still has a half-hearted desire to seek God, they are unable to realize that they are, in fact, rejecting God.

Yet if one looks objectively at that person’s life, it is clear that they are effectively discarding Christ and treating Him as no more than an accessory. This also appears in church life. There is no serious attitude of engaging with the Word in order to obtain salvation from it. There is no awareness that one’s very life depends on whether one can learn from the Word.

Therefore, the command in today’s passage, “Like newborn babies, long for the pure, spiritual milk,” can be said to press today’s stubborn church to reexamine its own posture. We are being asked, “Are we desperately longing for Christ, or are we discarding Him?” At the same time, it should be added that there still remains hope in God’s mercy.

A person who is desperately trying to learn from the Word solely in order to grow toward salvation is obvious at a glance. Just as parents can tell the difference between a student who is seriously preparing

for an exam and one who is not, one can tell simply by looking. Naturally, one cannot deceive God's eyes. God sees all of us.

Therefore, as God's judgment draws near, we must fear God all the more, put away the impure motives in our hearts — that is, all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, and envy in our hearts — and seriously long for the Word. And we desire to be those who somehow bring our hearts to a state with absolutely no malice and arrive at salvation. This is what we are led to think.

**Prayer:**

Father God, who judges all things,

Today we have learned that You require us to long for You with 100% purity of heart. We accept this as entirely reasonable. Yet we also realize that our hearts quickly become filled with all kinds of self-centered thoughts and soon become impure.

Please allow us first to see our own hearts as You see them. And please grant us help so that we may live lives in which we "receive Your Word with pure motives and store up the wisdom necessary for salvation."

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.