

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF FIRST PETER

ADD TO YOUR FAITH, VIRTUE!

Read 2 Peter 1:5-9

Introduction.

Last week, we studied verses 1-4 of 2 Peter where Peter reveals that through knowing God, Christians have been given everything we need to lead the life God calls us to. We're not missing anything. Jesus has showed us His glory and goodness; He calls us to follow His example; and he has equipped us to do so. We also found out that by Jesus' glory and goodness—because He lived sinlessly and now exists in glory forever—we have been given something of enormous worth: promises.

The God of the universe does not lie and does not fail to keep His word. Coming from Him, a promise is a declaration of certainty. A promise is eternal currency. A promise is a tangible gift.

These promises of God are of such great value that merely possessing them has already given us the right to participate in the "divine nature." In other words, we are already partners with Christ in the work God is doing in the world. More specifically, we are, right now, able to begin to answer Jesus' call to live in His glory and goodness.

Building Character One Quality at a Time

"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love." (vv5-7)

"For this very reason..." What reason? So that we might escape the world's corruption and share in the divine nature (1:4). For this very good reason we are to take this spiritual growth regimen with all seriousness. "Giving all diligence" is the Greek noun "spoudē", which has the basic meaning, "swiftness of movement or action, haste, speed." Here it means "earnest commitment in discharge of an obligation or experience of a relationship, eagerness, earnestness, diligence, willingness, zeal."

We think of the word "add" in mathematical terms. But the Greek word goes a slightly different direction. "Add" is the Greek verb "epichorēgeō", "to provide (at one's own expense), supply, furnish."

It sounds very spiritual to say, "Just let God do it" -- and there is truth in that. But here Peter is enumerating some things that we ourselves must add to what God has already done. God does his part, we do ours. These virtues we "provide at our own expense" -- that is the thrust of the Greek word. Of course, we are aided by the Holy Spirit, but we, too, must "make every effort." These qualities of Christian character and maturity are like seven rungs of a ladder -- except that we don't achieve them sequentially, but work on them all at the same time.

We begin our life with God with faith, but faith progresses into virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love — love being the capstone of all God's work in us.

- **Added Quality 1: Virtue**

"Virtue" which translate the Greek noun "aretē", which we saw in 1:3 -- "uncommon character worthy of praise, excellence of character, exceptional civic virtue," a term denoting consummate "excellence" or "merit" within a social context. God wants us to be exemplary citizens, both of the Kingdom of God and of the society in which we live. We are called to be of the highest moral character.

What will that take for you? What character flaws have you been excusing all these years? God calls you to move higher and take on his own excellence of character. Lying, cheating on income tax, petty theft, inappropriate flirting, you name it. God calls you to his own excellence of character.

- **Added Quality 2: Knowledge**

The second quality is "knowledge," the Greek noun "gnosis". I don't think Peter is talking so much about "knowing God" here. That's part of the basis that comes with faith (1:2). Here he's talking about knowledge of scripture, knowledge about how to live the Christian life. We can bungle around in spiritual ignorance only for so long. Now it's time to learn spiritual lessons and begin to grow.

You might begin by taking a few minutes to review some of the lessons God has taught you through the tough times in your life. What did he teach you? Write it down. Make it part of your knowledge base on which you can learn more. Begin to ask more mature Christians about how they handle various kinds of struggles. They'll share with you. No one is immune from these lessons. Seek after knowledge of God's ways and his word.

- **Added Quality 3: Self-control**

The third quality is "self-control". The Greek noun here is "egkrateia" means "restraint of one's emotions, impulses, or desires, self-control," which also means "the virtue of one who masters his desires and passions, especially his sensual appetites.". It is the basis of any achievement in any field of endeavor -- self-discipline.

If we're good parents, we try to instill self-discipline and self-control into our children. But do we discipline ourselves? Do we burst out in anger or fear or quick judgment upon another? Do we allow ourselves to be spiritually soft, to skip the gatherings of God's people, to skip reading God's word and prayer? The same character quality, self-control, self-discipline also relates to how we use or abuse alcohol, prescription drugs, illicit drugs -- and food, for that matter. We must learn to control ourselves. No one else can do it for us. Dear friends, we must be our own task master and discipline ourselves if we would grow in maturity. It is a must. It isn't all up to Jesus. This discipline part is up to us. It's what we "provide at our own expense."

- **Added Quality 4: Perseverance**

The fourth quality to maturity is "perseverance". The Greek noun "hupomonē" denotes "the capacity to hold out or bear up in the face of difficulty; patience, endurance, fortitude, steadfastness, perseverance."

Mature Christians have a long view of the Christian life. A short view causes us to start and stop a lot, looking at short-term results. But in the long run, steadfastness will win the day. This means, of course, that we need to be careful about the directions we take. When you know you have taken a wrong turn, of course, you don't stay on that path out of stubbornness. But God can help us to take fewer wrong turns. I've learned that opposition from others doesn't mean that you're doing something wrong. It may mean you're doing something right. When Peter and the apostles were arrested and flogged for preaching Jesus (Acts 5:40), they didn't stop. They prayed for boldness and continued on. Perseverance requires courage and faith -- and is an essential step towards Christian maturity.

- **Added Quality 5: Godliness**

The fifth quality is "godliness." "Godliness" is the Greek noun "eusebeia", which we saw in 1:3 which means "profound or awesome respect accorded to God; devoutness, piety, godliness." This word encompasses a lot. But I want to highlight two aspects of godliness:

(1) A healthy fear of God. Sometimes I hear a kind of flippancy about God, a light attitude that doesn't fear to joke about him. Perhaps I'm old fashioned, but I don't think that's appropriate. In my experience, it's the people who don't know God very well at all who speak about him in jest. Those who do know him love and respect him too much to do so.

(2) A devotional life. Christians who grow in their faith always have (or are in the process of developing and refining) some kind of disciplined way in which they approach God -- reading the word, fasting, times of prayer, meditation, etc.

- **Added Quality 6: Brotherly kindness.**

The sixth rung is "brotherly kindness". The Greek noun "Philadelphia" means, "love of brother or sister," the affection one has for family members. In the New Testament it refers to a sense of affection for a fellow-Christian. I think "brotherly kindness" gets the short end of the stick as far as our value of it. We are often taught that agapē love (the seventh quality of Peter's list) is more important. And thus, we value "brotherly kindness" less. Why does Peter mention both rather than lump them together under agapē love? I believe he is talking specifically about the love that Christians have for one another in the Body of Christ.

"If it weren't for people, ministry would be great," I sometimes joke after some less-than-ideal encounter with a church member. The reason the quip is funny at all is because it is impossible. God has placed us among people -- imperfect people who, at their best moments, strive to follow the Lord more fully. And he expects us to treat them as brothers and sisters. Not brothers and sisters at the height of sibling rivalry and spats, but brothers and sisters who would do anything for each other.

In the Middle East and many other parts of the world, family is everything. You will die to protect a family member. If a family member is out of work or homeless, you take them in to help them through this time. We have a saying, "Blood is thicker than water," which means that family relations are more important than all other relationships. It is this attitude that Peter tells us is a sign of Christian maturity. Rather than retreat from our brothers and sisters, we must embrace them and love them -- warts and all. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "*By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love (agapē) one another*" (**John 13:35**).

- **Added Quality 7: Love**

Last, but not least is "love" in Greek "agape" -- "the quality of warm regard for and interest in another; esteem, affection, regard, love". To tell the truth, this word just wasn't used much in Greek culture; it was pretty rare. However, it became an extremely common word in the early Christian community. Christian writers appropriated an uncommon word for love and used to convey a very special kind of love -- love which gives without thought of what it will get back.

Its highest expression is found in God our Father and Jesus his Son:

"We love because he first loved us." (**1 John 4:19**)

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (**Romans 5:8**)

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (**John 3:16**)

To love this way just isn't human nature, you may object. If sinfulness and fallenness are the essential definition of humanity, you may be right. But God made us humans to be more than we are. He created

us in his image so that we can transcend our selfish, animal selves -- even for a short time -- and become like him. To think like him, to love like him, to dream like him. We are called to something higher than that which benefits us. We are called to love.

Christian Productivity and Effectiveness

“For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is short-sighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.” (vv8-9)

If we have these things and abound in these things (the 7 qualities Peter has listed), it is evident to everyone that we are not barren nor unfruitful in our knowledge of Jesus. The words barren and unfruitful characterize the lives of many Christians, who lack these qualities because they lack in their knowledge of God, that is, knowing Him relationally in an increasingly fuller and deeper sense.

Looking at the word "abound". This is the Greek verb “pleonazō” which means "to become more and more, so as to be in abundance, "be/become more or be/become great, be present in abundance, grow, increase." Growth in the fruit of the Spirit, in establishing Christian character in our lives, is a continuing and expanding process.

There's an old saying, "Jesus catches his fish before he cleans them." You've been rescued. You've been caught. Now Jesus is working on your character, producing his character in you.

Christ's character prevents two related problems for Christians: ineffectiveness (barrenness) and low productivity (unfruitful).

"Barren" is the Greek adjective “argos”, and denotes "unemployed, idle, lazy." Here it is "pertaining to being unproductive, useless, worthless." I've known many church-goers whose lives have little positive, Christian impact on either their families or their workplaces. They are spiritually barren because they have resisted letting Jesus transform their lives with his character.

"Unfruitful" is the Greek adjective “akarpos”, literally, "without fruit." Here it is used figuratively, "pertaining to being useless, unproductive." No fruit, no fruitfulness. This kind of person is a taker, not a giver, for he has little to give.

How sad to have "knowledge" of Christ, but keep it so in ourselves that no one knows it! How very sad, to be spiritually barren.

Cleansed from Old Sins (Blindness)

If we lack these things, it shows we have “eye trouble.” We are short-sighted, unable to see God, only ourselves. This makes us virtually blind, showing we have forgotten that we were cleansed from his old sins.

- Perhaps this one has forgotten how bad he was, and how much he needed this cleansing.
- Perhaps this one has forgotten the great cost of this purging of sin's dirty stain.
- Perhaps this one has forgotten how great and complete the cleansing is, making a once guilty sinner now as pure and as white as snow (Isaiah 1:18).

Peter says we are blind if we don't think we need to build Christian virtues into our lives. If we make excuses for ourselves and don't leave our old sins behind, we are in danger of spiritual blindness, spiritual amnesia. Jesus cleansed us to bless us -- and that blessing includes growing up in Christ and leaving our old sins behind.

