

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Godliness That Grows

2 Peter 1:1-11

In last Sunday's sermon, I focused on God's holiness, which has love at its center, and how the holy love of God is like fire that purifies us as his redeemed people. In keeping with that message, these were the words we sang in the last verse of the hymn of commitment, before leaving the Lord's house: "Burn in me, Fire of God, / Burn til Your eyes can see / Jesus' own image, strong and sure, / Formed by Your grace in me!" So as we exited from worship, we asked God to transform us. And that's because God's goal for us is Christlikeness.

Remember that God intends for us to be more than just forgiven. His purpose is also for us to be made new in Christ, bearing the image of God in the world. And part of what this means is that every believer is a recovering sinner. The Holy Spirit is working in us to purify us from the effects of sin and to form us into people who reflect Christ, just as Christ reflects God.

But exactly what does this transformation look like? It's one thing to be exhorted toward Christlikeness and godliness. But it's another to lay out some of the specific steps that take you in the direction of God's glory. So what are some of the marks of the Spirit's operation in a Christian's life? What are some of the qualities that grow and develop in the lives of God's people as we journey toward the eternal kingdom? Today's Scripture passage from 2 Peter can help us answer these questions.

After greeting the recipients of his letter, Peter makes a bold and confident claim. Not confidence in our capacity to be who God intends us to be. Rather, confidence in what God has done for us through Christ, and assurance about how the life of Christ can take shape in us. In verse 3, Peter says, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."

Listen to that opening affirmation again: "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness." As we set our sights on Christ's coming and the full manifestation of God's reign, we're not left to make it on our own. We're not operating in our own power, but in the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead. This same life-giving power is at work in us. So before we go any further in this text, we, like Peter's first hearers, need to know that through our union with Christ by faith, we have all that we need, the very power of God, the life of Christ, in us, enabling us to live godly lives.

And in addition to God's power, we have God's promises. Promises about the culmination of God's saving purposes. Promises about the coming of God's kingdom. Promises about the completion of God's work of holiness and righteousness in us. Promises about sharing fully in the divine life and glory. That's why Peter says, in verse 4, that God "has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." So we who have the power of God in us, and the promises of God sustaining us, belong to the new world being

called into existence through Christ, not the old world of corruption and sin and death that's on its way out.

Now that we have the good news of God's power and God's promises firmly in place, we can actually proceed, with Peter, into what this means for the kind of lives we live. Verse 5 begins, "For this very reason." In other words, because of what God has done for us in Christ, and the gift of life we have through him, "make every effort." That phrase, "make every effort," reminds us that though God has done everything necessary for us to be forgiven and remade in the image of Christ, there are still things that we as believers need to do in order to increase the image of Christ in our character. And we shouldn't do these things halfheartedly or casually, but with energy and effort, especially when we consider the generosity of God's gift in Christ and the goal of our life in Christ.

So we're at that step in our text where Peter basically says yes, God, in his mercy and love, has restored us to himself through Christ. But the power of sin isn't just going to go away overnight. If you know Jesus as Lord, you've got all the resources and tools that you need to make progress in becoming like him. It's a matter of getting to work in using what you've been given.

From this point in our passage, Peter goes on to list some of the virtues that should be evident in the lives of people who have come to know God through Jesus Christ. Before we get deeper into this list of virtues, note a couple of things. First of all, the list isn't exhaustive. Peter doesn't cover every characteristic that should be visible in the life of a Christian. But he does highlight some of the essentials. Secondly, he presents this list of virtues using a literary device that many hearers of his day and time would recognize. Each statement picks up the last key word of the preceding statement and uses that word to move the list forward toward a dramatic conclusion. For example, "add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control," and so on.

With these things in mind, let's take a closer look at the specific virtues that Peter lays out to give us a picture of progress in Christlikeness. First up is faith. "Make every effort to add to your *faith* goodness." It's no accident that Peter begins the list with faith. Faith is the foundation on which all the other virtues are built. It's the root from which all the other virtues grow. And Peter doesn't just mean faith in the broad sense of a general trust in God. He means faith in the more specific Christian sense of confidence in the power of God in Christ. He means reliance on the trustworthiness of God's word in Christ. He means faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This good news of salvation is to be received by faith.

And add to your faith *goodness*. Goodness essentially means moral excellence. In the Christian sense, it has to do with living righteously. Goodness is about the righteousness of Christ operating in us and taking shape in our lives. This will mean more than just avoiding doing bad things. It will mean energetically pursuing what's good, and doing what's good. Things that you don't do are definitely part of the picture. But just as significant are the things you do, the things that are in keeping with virtue and holiness. So Peter reminds us that as we live toward the coming of God's kingdom in Christ, our job isn't to run out the clock and stay out of trouble. Our calling is to actively live lives of moral excellence, lives that reflect the glory of God.

And add to goodness, *knowledge*. In this case, knowledge doesn't mean that you've mastered a body of information, or that you've downloaded as much as your brain can hold on a particular subject. Nor does it mean knowledge of God in Christ, though that's certainly an important thing to Peter. No, in this particular context, knowledge means wisdom. It means having the kind of understanding that enables you to know how to put into practice the way of Christ in particular situations. In other words, knowledge is about

having discernment. It means being able to discern and do the will of God in the specific circumstances, decisions, and experiences of daily life.

And add to knowledge, *self-control*. As Christians, we need to be self-disciplined and on guard against indulging ourselves in excess. Now this doesn't mean that it's wrong to have desires, passions, and feelings. These are all part of who we are as beings made in the image of God. But we can easily lose control and pursue our desires in ways that are indulgent and abusive. This can happen in our sexuality, our appetites, our finances, our speech, just to name a few. So we need the power of God in Christ to enable us to master ourselves and to rightly direct our passions and desires, in keeping with the values and priorities of God's kingdom.

And add to self-control, *perseverance*. Like self-control, perseverance takes the long view of things, rather than focusing on immediate gratification or freedom from all hardship. Perseverance is about steadfastness and endurance, especially in the face of temptation, suffering, and evil. Perseverance is about living with a strong sense of accountability to God, knowing that the day of reckoning will come when we must answer to Christ for what we have done with the good news of the kingdom. So in view of Christ's coming, we devote ourselves, day by day, to his work in the world. I like the way that one commentator puts it when he says, "In the realm of Christian living perseverance is the willingness to take the time to build a life that is not spiritually shoddy but will stand the tests of daily use."¹ A life like that is built on the confidence that what God has begun through Christ God will bring to completion, and his promises will be fully realized.

And add to perseverance, *godliness*. Peter used this word "godliness" back in verse 3 as he laid the foundation for the Christian life. It has to do with an attitude of honoring God, acknowledging God's authority, and respecting God's will. But even more than that, godliness involves living in right relationship with God and with others. To be godly is to reflect God's own character in our dealings with other people. In other words, we relate to others the way that God has related to us. In particular, we show mercy and love toward others as God has been merciful and loving toward us in Christ. And by doing so, we embody God's reconciling purposes in the world. We exhibit godliness.

And add to godliness, *brotherly kindness*. Here Peter narrows his focus to relationships with fellow believers. That's because one of the primary ways we Christians exhibit godliness is through our commitment to and care for brothers and sisters in Christ. The word that Peter uses for "kindness" can also mean "affection." So the kind of bond that Peter is describing is the close, intimate connection that believers have with one another, a connection that gets lived out and practiced in very concrete ways in the church.

And to brotherly kindness, *love*. It's not by accident that Peter saves the most important virtue for last. After all, love is the crowning virtue, the one that powers and coordinates all the others. Virtue by virtue, Peter has been leading us to this point, to love, where all the other virtues find their depth and meaning. This is love that goes beyond the affection we show toward fellow believers. It's love that reflects God's love, for all. It's a love that sacrifices and empties for the good of the other. It's the love of Christ, in whose image we are being remade.

In verse 8, after taking us step by step through this list of Christian virtues, this three-verse journey from faith to love, Peter says, "For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." He also goes on to warn that to the extent that we don't exhibit these virtues, we show that we've forgotten God's great mercy in forgiving our past sins. The goal, says Peter, is to continually cultivate these virtues, to progress in moral

excellence, to grow in godliness. In our day to day lives as Christians, what matters is an increasing ability to think and act like Christ, and in the end to enter into his eternal kingdom.

¹ Robert Harvey and Philip H. Towner, *2 Peter and Jude*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009) 45.