

Truth for Today

The Bible explained

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Some Bible Lists: Things to add to our faith

This morning we come to the final talk in our series on lists in the Bible. Over the past weeks we've considered:

- The Armour of God in Ephesians;
- The Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians; and
- Things to think about and meditate upon in Philipians.

This morning we are going to turn our attention to 2 Peter 1 and consider the list we find there of things to add to our faith. Let's read 2 Peter 1:5-9 straight away so we have an immediate sense of the material we will cover this morning.

"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. 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 shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins."

So there we can see a list of things that Peter says should characterise our Christian lives: faith, virtue, knowledge, self control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love. We'll discuss each of these in more detail over the course of the broadcast this morning but from the very outset I was challenged as I thought about these qualities. Do they characterise my life? Do they characterise yours? Do people look at me and think I'm someone filled with self-control and kindness and love? Perhaps not as often as I would like! These verses then are a challenge to me as to whether I am displaying qualities in my life that befit what I claim to believe.

Before we study the individual qualities in detail and consider their application for us today, I think it's useful to consider where 2 Peter 1:5-9 fits into Peter's second epistle as a whole.

Straight after the list of qualities in 2 Peter 1:8, we get an immediate motivation as to why these characteristics are important. *"If these things are yours and abound you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."* How's that for motivation? The more these qualities are evident in our lives the more fruitful we will be in our knowledge of Christ.

If you think about it, this is quite a staggering truth. It means that the key obstacle in my knowing God better is not my intelligence or academic ability. It's not how many commentaries I own or whether or not I have a theology degree. No, Peter says that maybe the reason I don't know Christ as well as I should is because I lack self control, or because I don't persevere, or because I'm not kind. This really places a high importance on all of our daily interactions. The way I speak to my wife and children affects my ability to know Christ. The way I react at work affects my ability to know Christ. I'm sure you can think of many other situations too.

If this seems to you like an impossible situation, don't be discouraged by these verses. I'm sure that most of us when we stop to consider the implications of these verses would begin to worry. I'm not always self-controlled or kind or loving. I don't always display virtue. Is all hope of knowing God lost? No! When Peter writes, *"if these things are yours and abound"* (2 Peter 1:8), I think the sense is that they are becoming increasingly evident in our lives. The New International Version translates it *"if you possess these qualities in increasing measure"*, whilst the English Standard Version has *"if these qualities are yours and are increasing"* which I think gives the sense of the clause. So rather than see these verses as an impossible standard and giving up, let's view them as an encouragement to keep allowing the grace of God to change us and make us more like Christ. Perhaps a more reasonable question is, "Am I more self controlled than a month ago?" or "Am I becoming more loving?" Rather than being discouraged by 2 Peter 1:8, let's be encouraged that by becoming more and more characterised by these qualities we will become more fruitful in our knowledge of God. What a prospect! What Christian doesn't want to know God better? What Christian doesn't want to be filled with wonder as he or she grasps some fresh aspect of God's nature and gets a fresh appreciation of all He has done for us?

The dangers of not being characterised by the qualities Peter lists are spelled out in 2 Peter 1:9. *“He who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was purged from his old sins.”* I think we would have to say that the opposite of all of these characteristics would be sinful. By failing to display brotherly kindness I’m likely to sin against my brother in the way I interact with him. Peter says that by failing to show these qualities we’ve forgotten that this was exactly how we lived before we became a Christian. He’s saying that there is not much difference now to before we were saved and that shouldn’t be the case. Peter says we’re blinded and are not taking our sinful actions seriously enough. It’s as if we’ve forgotten that Christ died to purge us (or make us clean) from our sins.

Surely we don’t want to be like that? Can I ask you this morning, if you are a believer do you often consider the fact that Christ has cleansed you from your sins? Is it fresh in your mind each day? If it is, then I think we are more likely to avoid the danger of 2 Peter 1:8 and more likely to show the qualities that lead to a more fruitful knowledge of Christ.

I think the key motivation for displaying the qualities listed in 2 Peter 1:5-7, however, actually comes at the beginning of the chapter. Peter writes in 2 Peter 1:5, *“for this very reason.”* We need to ask the question, what reason does Peter mean? What is the reason that necessitates adding virtue to our faith and so on? It comes in 2 Peter 1:1-4. There, Peter describes the glorious position the Christian is in.

Peter says in 2 Peter 1:1 that *“we have obtained like precious faith.”* What we have as believers is something precious. The truth that God loves us, gave His Son for us to take our judgment so that we could have new life is a precious truth. Do I value it in that way?

In 2 Peter 1:3 Peter goes further and says that God has given us all things that pertain to life. God has given us everything we need for new life in Christ. This is important. When we consider in a few minutes things we are to add to our faith, Peter is not describing a list of things we need to do in order to be saved. He says in verse three that God has already done that and given us all we need. We don’t add virtue to our faith in order to impress God and force Him to save us. God has already done that. God’s way of saving us and giving us new life comes only through a knowledge of Christ. That’s what 2 Peter 1:3 says! We’ve come into the good of being given all things that pertain to life because of our knowledge of Christ. It’s because we realise that Jesus Christ has died for us and borne our sins in His own body on the cross and we accept His death in our place that we come into the good of all God has done for us.

2 Peter 1:4 says that *“we have been given exceedingly great and precious promises.”* We’ve become partakers of the divine nature. I think that means that we have been united with Christ. Clearly we don’t become gods or anything like that. But Peter says we have been united with Christ in a special way. We’ve been severed from the corruption in the world and joined to Christ.

Perhaps much of this sounds strange to someone listening to the broadcast this morning? I want to ask you whether what I have just described is your experience? Have you come to a knowledge of God and an appreciation of what Christ has done for you? If not, then what stops you today from becoming a Christian? These *“exceedingly great and precious promises”* (2 Peter 1:4) are not limited to just a few. The blessing of salvation that Peter discusses here is available to all who will trust in Christ. If you’ve never done that, then why not get a transcript of this message from the *Truth for Today* website, or ask for a recording to listen to this and other messages again. Better still why not get a Bible and read through the New Testament to learn about what God has done in order that you could become a partaker of the divine nature.

Let’s come back to the list of qualities. It’s because God has already saved us and given us all things necessary for Christian living that Peter gives us this list. He gives this list, not as a list of requirement in order to be saved but as a description of how our lives should change having been saved.

How should we think about this list of qualities? Does the fact that Peter uses the phrase “add” each time mean that we must perfect one of these qualities before moving on to another? Should we think that we have no need to develop perseverance yet because we haven’t mastered self-control? I don’t think so. It seems to me that there is a lot of overlap between some of these qualities. There are differences between each of them but some of them are certainly similar.

I suspect that what Peter means is that we should be continually growing. It’s as if he’s saying, “Don’t rest easy because you learnt to live virtuously, keep working on your knowledge of Christ. Don’t think you’ve made it because you know something about Christ, pursue self-control” and so on. I think the main point of these verses is to encourage us to a lifelong pursuit of demonstrating these qualities more and more in our lives.

Let’s spend some time thinking about each of these eight items in Peter’s list.

Faith

The first mentioned is faith. Without faith none of the rest of the things in this chapter will make sense. Faith is believing God's promises. Peter says in the beginning of the chapter that they had precious faith like his own, or faith of an equal standing to his own (2 Peter 1:1). It was faith that had brought these believers into the good of the great and precious promises Peter mentioned in 2 Peter 1:4. It was faith that brought them into the good of being given all things that pertain to life.

If one of the believers reading Peter's letter felt they had a rather unfruitful life, they didn't seem to appreciate God much and weren't serving Him wholeheartedly, then perhaps the first place they needed to look was at their faith. Did they really believe God's great and precious promises? Did they really take God at His word? Do I? Do you? I wonder how many of my problems stem from the fact that I don't really believe that God can do all that He says He can do? Over the coming week, let's keep in mind this fact. God has given us exceedingly great and precious promises and has made us into partakers of the divine nature. Do we really believe this? Does it fill our hearts with joy that this is true and does it make our lives more fruitful and our appreciation of all that God has done increase day by day? Or are we more like the people described in 2 Peter 1:9, short sighted and blind with little appreciation of what God has done for us?

Virtue

"Add to your faith virtue." That's the next item on the list. Virtue could be described as moral excellence. Keep in mind that the point of 2 Peter 1:5-9 is not to say that by being morally excellent we earn God's salvation, but that because God has saved us and changed us it's a delight for us to pursue things pleasing to God.

So Peter is not saying that we should pursue moral excellence in order to be able to look down on everyone and reinforce a stereotype of holier than thou Christians. Rather he is saying that because God has changed us and made us partakers of the divine nature, it would be wholly inappropriate to be characterised by shady morals. That wouldn't be like God at all and so shouldn't be like those of us who have been made partakers of the divine nature.

We're not better than anyone else if we pursue moral excellence or virtue. How could we be? We were saved whilst undeserving just like anybody else. But we pursue moral excellence because it is pleasing to the God we love, and it helps us be fruitful in our knowledge of God.

So then, we need to think about the application to our own lives. Are there areas in our lives when our morals have been allowed to slip? Have we turned a blind eye to our attitude to work, or our commitment to truthfulness? I suspect we each could examine our own hearts and find areas of our lives where we are not quite as moral or virtuous as we would like to think. Let's be diligent to add to our faith virtue.

Knowledge

"To virtue knowledge." Now we know that it's possible to have a lot of knowledge about God and not be specially close to Him. But Peter is saying here that in at least some sense we need to be diligent to learn more about Christ. We need to grow in our knowledge of Him.

This makes perfect sense. Who wouldn't want to get to know better someone they claim to love? It would be a strange thing if I claim to love my wife but have no interest in learning more and more about what she likes and dislikes and what makes her tick! Of course, it would be possible to know a whole load of facts about my wife. You could know her height, eye colour, hair colour, shoe size, educational history and lots more but it would still be possible not to **know** her. You would have plenty of knowledge about her, but not knowledge of her. You wouldn't know what makes her smile, or what makes her sad. You wouldn't be able to know how she would react in any given situation. I think that's a bit of Peter's point here. I must say that I can't claim to know perfectly how my wife will react in any situation, that knowledge is a lifelong pursuit. Similarly getting to know God is a lifelong pursuit, and even at the end of it there will still be more we don't know than we do.

Peter says to these believers be diligent to grow in your knowledge of Christ. So let me ask you as we try to apply these verses to ourselves, are you increasing in your knowledge of God? How diligently are you taking opportunities to learn more about God? How regularly and carefully are you reading the Scriptures? Jesus said that the Scriptures spoke about Him (see John 5:39) so they are a good place to start in our quest to know God better. How regularly do we make the most of whatever opportunities are available to us of hearing God's word taught publicly? For most of us that will involve commitment to a local church and regularly placing ourselves in a position where we can hear the Bible taught faithfully. But perhaps for some, circumstances in life may prevent this. There are other opportunities to hear faithful teaching of the Scriptures on the Internet and radio. There is an abundance of good books explaining the Scriptures. All of these can help us grow in our knowledge of Christ.

Let me repeat, I'm not advocating knowledge for knowledge's sake. I'm simply saying that I can't think of any good reason why all Christians shouldn't be diligently reading the Scriptures and learning more about Christ. The promise of these verses says that by doing so we will become more fruitful in our getting to know God even better. What a prospect!

Self-control

The next quality on the list is self-control. This is a quality we have already considered in this series when we thought of the fruit of the Spirit. Peter says to these believers that they don't just need to develop their faith and virtue and knowledge. They also need to have some control over their emotions and actions. This is quite an easy quality to know what we ought to do. I think we all have a pretty good idea of what self-control looks like. The disconnect comes when we try to live it out. How many times do I say things I shouldn't to my family and react in anger towards them? How much do I control what I watch on the TV, or what I eat, or what I say? Perhaps too often the answer has to be not enough. But Peter says self-control is a key ingredient to a fruitful knowledge of God. It's right then that I should pursue it diligently. There are so many areas of life in which self-control is needed. Am I diligently pursuing self-control? As the weeks and months go by, am I learning to show more self control in how I speak to my daughter? Am I learning to turn the TV off when unhelpful things come on, or just when I've been sat watching it long enough? Be diligent to add to your knowledge self-control.

Perseverance

In addition to faith, virtue, knowledge and self-control, Peter also encourages the believers to develop perseverance. This was going to be another crucial ingredient if the believers Peter writes to were to live fruitful lives increasing in the knowledge of God. Would they give up at the first sign of opposition from the world around them? Would they give up on chasing knowledge of God as soon as they came across something hard in some of Paul's writings? The English Standard Version translates this word as "steadfastness", which I think adds to our understanding of what Peter is describing. Would these believers stand fast and strong in the face of whatever adversity may come their way?

As we turn again to our own lives to try and apply these truths to ourselves we would have to admit that there are many reasons in life that would tempt us to give up in our Christian lives. To openly admit to being a Christian in at least some company is to invite ridicule and have people think we are a little bit strange and outdated for society today. Wouldn't it be easier to give up and keep our faith private, or to give up altogether?

If you are involved in any ministries at your church, whether that is helping believers in some way, or reaching out with the good news of the Gospel in whatever form that may take, I'm sure you will have found plenty of cause to tempt you to give up. People don't respond the way you'd hoped. Others aren't grateful and don't appreciate the time and effort you have put in. Wouldn't it be easier to just give up? At least then you'd have an extra night at home each week to spend with your family or watch some program on the TV. But that's not what Peter encourages. That would be the way to barren and unfruitful living. Peter says persevere. Perseverance leads to fruitful living and an increasing knowledge of God. So which would we have? Would we rather have the easy life or will we diligently pursue perseverance and not give up living faithful lives?

Godliness

Next comes godliness. The essence of this word is to live a life pleasing to God. In the past the word 'piety' might have had a similar meaning although it's rarely used positively today. We know from Paul's writing to Timothy that it is possible to have a form of godliness but not the real power of it (2 Timothy 3:5). But that is not what Peter has in mind. Peter is not speaking about merely religious ritual. He is encouraging the believers to live in a way that is pleasing to God. If virtue had to do with our moral actions, perhaps we could say that godliness aims more at our devotion to God. Are we diligently pursuing devotion to God?

Brotherly Kindness

After godliness, Peter reminds us about brotherly kindness. He says that how the believers interact with each other has an effect on how fruitful their lives will be. The English Standard Version calls this brotherly affection whilst the New International Version calls it brotherly kindness, both of which help us to understand what Peter is driving at. This is another crucial one for us to apply to our lives. How do we view other believers? They are described in the New Testament as our brothers and sisters. Do I treat them as such? Or am I more likely to belittle them or criticise them behind their backs? Peter would class this kind of behaviour as short sighted and blind and say we've forgotten what Christ has done for us.

Love

The final item on Peter's list is love. Even if we're getting better at showing brotherly kindness to other believers, what about the person at work whom we can't stand? Or the neighbour who constantly annoys us? Have we learnt to love them even so? Have we learnt to show them kindness? Peter says we must. We need to learn to show love if we are to have a fruitful knowledge of God. This sounds hard, doesn't it? At least, it does to me. But we must remember that Peter has already told us that God has given us all things necessary for life and made us partakers of the divine nature. With that, it's even possible to love people who up till now we've really disliked.

Conclusion

As we finish this morning's broadcast, let me just highlight one more thing from these verses. In both 2 Peter 1:5 and 2 Peter 1:10, Peter tells his readers to be diligent. What he was saying was something they should make every effort to do. That same diligence should characterise our own lives. So let's finish by answering in our own hearts the following questions:

- Is my faith in God's word growing week by week?
- Am I living a life characterised by virtue?
- Do I make every effort to increase my knowledge of God?
- Am I showing more and more self-control in my dealings with others?
- Do I persevere, even when situations are hard?
- Is my devotion for God increasing day by day and do I live a life pleasing to Him?
- Am I learning to be kind and affectionate to other members of my church and to Christians in general?
- Am I learning to love even those people who annoy me and rub me up the wrong way?

May we all do so in order to live fruitful lives and always be increasing in our knowledge of Christ!

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