

Fighting Spiritual Laziness

2 Peter 1:3-15

Back during my days of full-time teaching, I had a student who wasn't doing well in Latin. At the time of mid-quarter progress reports, she received her report and saw that her grade wasn't where it needed to be to avoid the appointed punishment from her parents. Looking ahead a few weeks to the end of the quarter, she desperately wanted to raise that grade up to a B by then. So she came to me one day in obvious distress and begged to know what she could do to raise her grade up to a B, hoping that I would offer some kind of extra credit option. I don't remember the exact words I used when I responded to her, but here's the substance of what I said: "You can raise your grade up to a B by learning Latin." And to her credit, that's what she did.

Of course, what I meant by that was that she needed to develop the habits that are necessary for students to learn the Latin language: paying close attention in class, getting homework done on time, studying vocabulary regularly, reviewing thoroughly for tests. Students cannot learn Latin if they are lazy about it. When my student wanted some kind of extra credit assignment, I pointed her back to the fundamentals and told her to apply herself diligently to them. That was all she needed.

Faithfully living the Christian life is mainly about doing the fundamentals well. It's about living day-in and day-out according to practices that orient our hearts toward God and toward our neighbors in love. The opposite of this kind of devotion is spiritual laziness, a concept that I'm sure most of us feel like we know all too well. Peter wrote his second letter to warn against false teachers who cultivated spiritual laziness in their hearers by teaching them bad theology. Specifically, it appears these false teachers denied the reality of the second coming of Christ, and with that denial unraveled the whole fabric of the gospel. False teaching can wreak havoc on our spiritual lives. But did you realize that you can become spiritually lazy even if you have mastered the best theology? In his parable of the soils, Jesus speaks of the Word of the gospel as seed that falls on various types of soil. In one image, the seed falls among thorns, where it sprouts up, but its life is eventually choked out by the thorns, so it remains fruitless. This image is meant to picture the way the cares of this world can choke out our fruitfulness by luring us into spiritual laziness.

As Peter makes clear in this passage today, the pathway to the kingdom of God is one in which we devote ourselves to the fundamentals and fight to overcome our natural tendency toward laziness in the things of God. Have you ever felt like you have been spiritually lazy? Maybe even listening to this message, do you feel as though that has been the pattern of your life recently? Then may the Holy Spirit, through the power of God's Word, give you the joy of repentance today. Peter gives us here four words of instruction on fighting against spiritual laziness.

First,

I. Believe that all you need for life is found in Christ (vv. 3-4).

I want to start here by going to the end of verse 4, which gives us the most interesting phrase in this passage, coming to an understanding of what it means, and then looking at how the rest of verses 3-4 lead up to it. At the end of verse 4, Peter writes, "so that through them [God's promises] you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire." What does it mean to be partakers of the divine

nature? Does it mean that our destiny is to be merged with God's essence, so that we lose our personal identities as we are absorbed into his divinity? No, that would contradict the whole teaching of Scripture about God. God always transcends us as Creator; there is never a merging of Creator and creature in the biblical teaching. Some have argued that partaking of the divine nature is simply speaking of moral transformation. Notice that it is connected to the phrase "having escaped the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire." And while moral transformation is certainly part of it, I think there is more. When Peter speaks of escaping "the corruption that is in the world," I think he means physical corruption. That is, this present world is destined for death, decay, and ultimately judgment and destruction, and the reason for that is because of the sinful desire of humanity that has put all creation under the curse of God's judgment. This world is on its way out, but we have the promise of escaping that coming corruption by becoming sharers of the divine nature. What that means is that we have the promise of being made fit for Heaven, fit for the world that is to come. Though our bodies belong to this present age, and will ultimately succumb to the death of this present age, because we are destined to become partakers of the divine nature, we are destined for immortality, for glory, for life in the heavenly realm where God and his glorious angels dwell. That is the hope to which God has destined us.

Peter's point in these two verses, then, is to argue that everything we need to get to that destiny has been given to us in Christ. When I say "all you need for life," do I mean "all you need to live your daily life," or "all you need to attain the goal of eternal life"? In other words, when Peter says in verse 3, "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness," does that phrase "life and godliness" mean "a godly life," or does it mean "eternal life and godliness"? Both are true, and I could almost go either way on that question, but I'm inclined to read the word "life" in verse 3 as a reference to eternal life. I think Peter's overall point here is directed toward the future, and he speaks of eternal life and godliness because, if you think about it, godliness brought to its consummation is eternal life. The point is this: we don't become godly so that we can merit some other reward of eternal life. No, in making us godly, God glorifies us so that we are like his Son, and that in itself is eternal life. It is the goal for which we were created and designed and is thus how we become most fully ourselves. To become conformed to the image of Christ is its own reward.

And Peter says all that we need to take hold of that blessing is found in Christ. Jesus Christ remains front and center in this passage. When Peter says, "His divine power" in verse 3, is he referring to Christ or to God the Father? Again, it could go either way, but I'm inclined to say that this is specifically a reference to Jesus Christ. Notice at the end of verse 2 that the noun closest to the word "his" from verse 3 is "Jesus our Lord." And Peter has already called Jesus "our God and Savior" in verse 1. So it fits well with what Peter has already said to refer to the divine power of Jesus Christ. I also think the phrase "him who called us to [or 'by'] his own glory and excellence" in verse 3 refers to Christ. Notice the link between Christ and glory later in verse 17: "For when he received honor and glory from God the Father..." Peter speaks of Jesus Christ himself calling us to salvation by his divine power and glory.

So what we see here is that all we need for eternal life and godliness has been given to us by the divine power of Christ. In fact, life and godliness come specifically "through the knowledge of him who called us" (v. 3). "Knowledge" is an important word in this letter, and here it refers to

our relationship with Christ that begins at conversion, when we come to faith in him. Life and godliness come, in other words, from knowing Jesus Christ. Peter goes on in verse 4 to say, “by which [glory and excellence] he has granted to us his precious and very great promises,” indicating that the fulfillment of all the promises of God in the Old Testament for our salvation are fulfilled in Christ.

So let me summarize what Peter says: we are destined to escape the corruption of this world for the glory of Heaven, and the divine power of Jesus Christ has granted us all that we need for that destiny. He has called us to himself, and he has brought to fulfillment all the promises of the Old Testament regarding our salvation. So let me pose a question to you: Do you ever doubt the divine power of Christ to overcome sin in you as he brings you on the path to glory? Do you find yourself excusing sinful habits because, you assume, “That’s just the way I am”? Maybe you assume, “Well, I’m just a short-tempered person, and I always will be.” Or maybe you think, “I’m addicted to alcohol, and the best I can do is manage that instead of fight it.” Or perhaps in place of alcohol it’s pornography or some other sexual sin. Or maybe you assume, “I have bad anxiety, and that’s a condition that I have to live with.” It is becoming more popular now for some Christians to adopt a sinful orientation as their own identity, calling themselves “gay Christians.” In every example, I think there is a failure to reckon with the divine power of Jesus Christ to give us all that we need for life and godliness. We are far too prone to settle for patterns of sin, assuming we are powerless to overcome them, when the gospel promises us more.

Now, let me give some nuance to what I’m saying here. I’m not saying the fight against sin is quick or easy. And I’m also not saying that our measure of progress in the fight is all or nothing. Scott Swain, the president of Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, recently wrote out some pastoral thoughts on this question that I thought were excellent, and I’ll summarize his argument: let’s say you struggle with anxiety. And you know Jesus’ command in Matthew 6:25: “Do not be anxious about your life.” Too often we think of fighting anxiety on the model of emptying a cup in order to fill it with something else. If your cup has anxiety in it, you imagine that in order to obey Christ you have to pour out all the anxiety so that you can fill it back up with assurance. But Dr. Swain argued that it doesn’t normally work like that. Instead of a cup, imagine a pair of scales, where one side weighs against the other. Your anxiety goes on one side, and it pulls the scale down. So what do you do? You counterweigh it with biblical truth on the other side. Yes, you may have natural feelings of anxiety that rise up in your heart (or anger, or lust, or craving for your next drink), but in order to obey Christ you don’t have to drive that out completely before you can rest in the truth you know. Rather, think of biblical truth of God’s promises, God’s sovereignty, God’s grace, pulling down the other side of the scale, outweighing your temptation to worry. That’s how you fight sin. And Christ’s divine power has given you everything you need in that fight, all the way to the day when you escape this decaying world and become a partaker of the divine nature. You have all that you need in Christ.

In addition to believing in Christ’s sufficiency for us, let us, second,

II. Make every effort to grow in virtue (vv. 5-9).

The Christian life is a life of progress toward a goal, and thus it is a life of intentional pursuit. Here Peter tells us to pursue eight virtues. And the point is not that we move sequentially from one to the other; I don’t think the order of the virtues is what is important (with one exception),

but the total picture of these virtues is supposed to impress on us the importance of being conformed in character to Christ.

Peter tells us in verses 5-7 to add to our faith virtue, or moral excellence. To virtue we must add knowledge. The word “knowledge” here is a different Greek word from the one used in verse 3, and here it seems to refer to knowing God’s will for the sake of moral discernment. You might even call it wisdom. We are to add to this knowledge self-control, or mastery of ourselves, especially when facing temptations. We are to add to self-control steadfastness, or perseverance in faith through suffering. To steadfastness we are to add godliness, or conformity to God’s own character. To godliness we are to add brotherly affection, or deep love for our brothers and sisters in the church. And then to brotherly affection we are to add love, the virtue of seeking the good of others, even our enemies. I mentioned that the order of these virtues does not seem to be important, except for the beginning of the list and the end of the list. Peter begins with faith, and he ends with love. That is indeed a progression. All virtue in us begins with faith, or looking outside ourselves to God’s provision for us in Christ. All virtue is ultimately oriented toward love, that is, love for God and for our neighbors, for that is the goal for which God designed us. In Galatians 5:6, Paul teaches that faith works through love. Peter hints at the same idea here.

What is the alternative to growing in virtue? In verses 8-9, Peter goes on, “For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.” If you do not progress in these virtues, your knowledge of Christ is ineffective and unfruitful, like the seed growing up among the thorns. Peter describes you as short-sighted and blind, meaning you can’t see what you’re supposed to see. And what is it that you are supposed to see? You are supposed to look back on your baptism and see the meaning of that event: cleansing from the penalty *and power* of sin over you. Your baptism marks you out as one who has been made new, and if you don’t live in light of that newness, you are spiritually blind. Peter is saying, in effect, that your conversion and baptism are a sham if you do not grow in these virtues.

So what’s the point for us? The point is summed up well at the beginning of verse 5: “For this very reason, make every effort...” The Christian life requires effort. It is not because your own efforts merit salvation for you, but it is because, under pressure from the world, the flesh, and the devil, the fight to grow in faith and to work out its implications throughout your life is a real fight. It is a struggle. It requires devotion of yourself to habits of gathering weekly with the church, of meditating daily on Scripture, of seeking the Lord daily in prayer, of stewarding your time and money to give back to the Lord regularly, of investing in other believers through loving service, of staying on guard against temptation. I’m sure many of you know people who have walked away from the Christian faith. Picture one of those people for a minute, and ask yourself this: was he devoting himself diligently and faithfully to these practices at the time he lost faith? Was he gathering regularly with the church? Was he seeking the Lord through Scripture and prayer diligently? Was he giving to the church? Was he invested in loving other believers? Was he on guard against sin and temptation? Or was he coasting along, allowing weeds of sin to grow up more and more into his heart? Don’t assume that you can simply drift along toward godliness. You won’t. You must make every effort to pursue it.

But don't miss the first four words of verse 5: "*For this very reason* make every effort..." For what reason? Because of what Peter said in verses 3-4, namely, that Christ's divine power has given us all we need for life and godliness. It is because Jesus Christ is fully sufficient for us that we must make every effort to draw on his divine power for our progress in virtue. It's not a matter of either Christ's power or our efforts; his power is what makes our efforts both possible and effective. So trusting in him, seek to grow in virtue as your faith works through love.

In the fight against spiritual laziness, you must believe that all you need for life is found in Christ. You must make every effort to grow in virtue. Third,

III. Be eager to confirm your calling and election (vv. 10-11).

Peter uses the terms "calling" and "election" in verse 10. Both terms speak of God's sovereignty in our salvation. The word "calling" does not refer only to the outward proclamation of the gospel that calls all who hear it to repentance. It refers to the inward work of the Holy Spirit that draws God's people to faith through the hearing of the gospel. When God said, "Let there be light," his words created the very thing that he spoke. So it is with the call Peter mentions here: it is a call that creates in us the very faith that it demands, when the Holy Spirit gives life to dead sinners as they hear Christ proclaimed to them; all who receive this internal call come to faith. As Jesus said in John 10:27, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." Similarly, the word "election" speaks of God's choice of his people before the foundation of the world. And Peter doesn't mean that God foresaw that some people would be better than others, or that some people would exercise faith of their own accord and others would not. No, this is an election that is from God's sovereign choice, by grace alone. Our salvation is entirely owing to God's grace, decided before we were ever created, and made effective by his power in calling us to faith. Peter speaks very strongly of the sovereignty of God in salvation.

So it may seem surprising, then, to look at what Peter actually says in verse 10: "Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall." At first that seems odd. How can we, by our own actions, have any effect on the sovereign calling and election of God? Is Peter saying that there is something after all that we must contribute on our own, and that salvation is not really all of grace? No, he's not saying that at all. What he's saying is that God's calling and election are invisible realities that manifest themselves in us through our growth in virtue. And so, after we have come to faith and confessed that through baptism, our continuing growth in faith and virtue demonstrates that our faith is real and, therefore, confirms to us and all who see our lives that God has truly chosen us and called us to be his own. By contrast, there are many who profess faith in baptism but who subsequently fall away from that faith, showing they have not been called or chosen by God. But Peter tells us that if we practice the qualities listed in verses 5-7, we will never fall, meaning we will never fall away from the faith. God will keep us to the end.

And then he goes on in verse 11, "For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." We do not enter the kingdom of Christ on the basis of our virtues. Nothing we can do will merit eternal life. We rest on the merits of Christ alone. But the pathway to the kingdom is a pathway of growing in virtue. It is the pathway God has ordained. Again, remember that eternal life is simply godliness in its consummate form. You cannot reach the blessing of eternal life without being conformed to image of Christ.

Have you ever heard a weather forecaster predict the time that the sun will rise the next morning and said, “Liar. The sun doesn’t rise. The earth rotates as it revolves around the sun.” No, we don’t think that way because we recognize that a statement can be true from different perspectives. Speaking from the perspective of an astrophysicist, you would say that the earth rotates around the sun. But speaking from the perspective of ordinary people looking at the sky, you would say the sun rises. One statement is not more true than the other; everything depends on the perspective from which you intend to speak. The same is true in the Bible. Sometimes we read about what we might call God’s perspective: his election unto salvation, his powerful, effective call. We see that he has sovereignly decreed it all from beginning to end, and everything is accomplished by his grace alone. And then sometimes we read about salvation from within our own perspective, and we are commanded to press on, to fight, to grow in faith. God’s perspective takes in the whole at once; ours is limited by our own time reference. And yet both are true. God elects to salvation. God calls to salvation by his powerful Word. And yet we must labor diligently to confirm our calling and election. Listen to how Paul puts together these two perspectives in Philippians 2:12-13 without indicating any hint whatsoever that he believes they contradict each other: “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Did you catch that? We must work out our salvation with fear and trembling precisely because it is God who works in us both to make us willing to do this and to empower our actions in doing so. Our actions do not cancel out God’s, nor do his actions cancel out ours. Both perspectives are true, and this can help us understand how it is possible that we can confirm our calling and election.

And so we come to a final word of exhortation in the fight against spiritual laziness. Fourth, **IV. Remember these things often (vv. 12-15).**

Peter knows that he will die soon. We read in John 21:18-19 that Jesus, after his resurrection, told Peter that he would glorify God by his death one day. Perhaps Peter, who was likely in Rome at the time of writing this letter, could tell from the beginning of persecutions against Christians perpetuated by the Emperor Nero that Jesus’ prophecy was soon about to be fulfilled. You notice from reading these verses that Peter indicates no fear of death. He knows that it is coming, that it has been appointed for him by God, and he has accepted that. The way he talks about it shows that Peter does not consider it loss. It is the laying aside of his “tent” (the Greek word used in verse 13 to refer to his body). A tent is a dwelling place that has little lasting value to begin with. You expect tents to wear out, and like a tent our bodies, which belong to this present age, will wear out. But if we hold to the promise of verse 4, namely, that we will escape the inevitable corruption of this present world by becoming fit for the world to come, losing your tent in this world is, truly, not a loss. You will get a new dwelling, a new body fit for the age to come.

But Peter does realize that his time to lead here on earth is limited, and he has one overarching concern as he delivers his parting words to these believers, and that is to make sure they remember the importance of what he has said in verses 3-11. Notice how many times he speaks of remembering. In verse 12 he writes, “I intend always *to remind you* of these qualities.” In verse 13, “I think it is right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up *by way of reminder.*”

Then in verse 15: “And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time *to recall these things*.” Peter is writing a letter that he envisions will long outlast him and serve as an ongoing reminder of his teachings. The fact that we are reading this letter in the year 2020 shows how important the writing of the apostolic teachings as New Testament Scripture is for the church.

Why is there so much emphasis on reminders and remembering? It’s because we are prone to forget. Forgetting is not so much an intellectual category in Scripture. Most of the time, to forget does not mean to have specific information lost from all memory. It means to allow important truth to fade from conscious view, leading to a way of life that ignores it. Forgetting is a moral failure, not so much an intellectual one. The generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt had witnessed the Lord inflict ten plagues on the Egyptians. They had witnessed his power in the parting of the Red Sea and the annihilation of the Egyptian army that pursued them. They had seen him provide bread from heaven and water from a rock. And when they got one glimpse of the mighty warriors among the Canaanites whose land God had promised to them, they doubted God’s ability to give them victory and decided they wanted to return to Egypt. What happened to them? Did they lose all intellectual ability to recall everything the Lord had done up to that point? No, of course not. What happened is they had forgotten in a moral sense. They did not intentionally live with God’s power, love, and faithfulness in their minds and hearts. They became spiritually lazy, and at the point of testing, their faith completely failed. That entire generation fell under God’s judgment in the desert.

This is why we must fight to remember who God is and what he has done for us in Christ. It’s why we need the rhythms of weekly worship with the church and daily meditation on Scripture and response to God in prayer. One practice that I started recently, and that I commend to you, is keeping a specific list of prayer requests along with records of every time God answers a prayer. Back in the spring I read George Mueller’s journal of answered prayers, and I decided that I wanted to begin the same practice, so I started keeping records in May, and I have already filled pages and pages with answers to prayer. Reading back regularly over those answers to prayer has been refreshment to my soul. It gives me a constant, evident reminder of God’s love for me expressed in specific acts of goodness he has given. In John 16:24 Jesus said to his disciples, “Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.” Remembering how God has answered in the past has been for me one particularly powerful and constant reminder that I can trust him today. The only way we can fight successfully to grow in the virtues Peter has outlined here is if we are reminded, again and again, that this is God’s appointed path into his kingdom.

According to the Reformers, a true church is known by two practices: the faithful preaching of the Word of God, and the right practice of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Our gatherings lately have been different from what we are used to, but we are still focusing on those two things: Word and ordinance. That is because the preaching of the Word and the practice of the ordinances are regular practices that help us remember rather than forget. So having heard God’s Word proclaimed today, let us now eat and drink in remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice for us. Christ has died for our sins and has been raised from the dead for our justification so that we may escape the corruption of this world by becoming partakers of the divine nature. Amen.