

# ESSENTIAL VIRTUES

MARKS OF THE CHRIST-CENTERED LIFE

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## Essential Virtues: Marks of the Christ-Centered Life

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*With steadfast love to Darrell, Jeremy,  
and Paul, my sons-in-law.*

*May this study help you grow in  
commitment, courage, and  
compassion as you and your dear  
wives rear the next generation of  
disciple-makers for the Lord Jesus.*



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## FOREWORD

The destiny of every believer is Christlikeness, the enemy of Christlikeness is sin, and the root of every sin is nourished by some theological error. That's why such a remarkable amount of space in the New Testament is devoted to combating false teaching. Galatians, Colossians, and the Pastoral Epistles of Paul, as well as the letters of James, Jude, Peter, and John all confront the Hydra of heresy. Every head may take a different form, but they are all connected to the same beast.

That so much false teaching surfaced so soon in the first century signifies the reality and gravity of our spiritual warfare. The transfer of our citizenship and allegiance from Satan's kingdom to God's (Colossians 1:13) has cosmic consequences. "There is no prince that will thus lightly lose his subjects," threatened Apollyon to Christian. Declaring himself the sworn enemy of Christian's new King, he raged, "I hate his Person, his Laws, and People; I am come out on purpose to withstand thee."

We are not ignorant of his schemes (2 Corinthians 2:11). Demonization of submission to authority and elevation of personal freedom as an ultimate virtue are the stock in trade of heresy, and as old as Eden. So the ubiquity of false teaching and the susceptibility of Christians to it are nothing new.

In a fallen world, every silver lining has a dark cloud. The profusion of modern communication media that furnish instant access to a surfeit of information also disseminate misinformation and disinformation. Religious teachers promoting personal freedom and peddling self-gratification from under a white and wooly exterior are as common as clover. The battle would be more manageable if the enemy were only external, but falsehood finds a ready ally in the fallen flesh indwelling each of us (James 1:14–15).

This book focuses on Peter's call to cultivate essential Christian virtues (2 Peter 1). But what initially sounds like a peacetime proposal to pursue Christian extras ("*add to your faith . . .*") is actually a call to arms triggered by the threat of this very brand of false teaching. I can think of no better preparation for beginning this book than to sit down and attentively read straight through Peter's very brief second epistle (a

ten-minute task). It's not difficult to detect what drives the letter: an urgency to warn believers that false teaching is intellectually, morally, and spiritually corrupting to the unstable (2 Peter 2). That's why Peter is passionate about our stability in the knowledge of Christ (1:10, 12; 2:14; 3:16–17). Bare knowledge of Christ isn't enough to protect us from the dangers of false teaching and apostasy (2:20–22). Believers must become *established* in their knowledge of Christ. How? Peter's answer is the informing and transforming influence of the Scriptures (1:2–4, 12–21; 3:1–6, 14–18). What Peter urges upon us in 1:5–7, therefore, are *virtues essential* for advancing our call to Christlikeness (1:4), for assuring us that our relation to Christ is genuine and vital (1:8–10), and for defending us against false teaching that appeals to the mind while seducing the flesh (3:17–18).

*Essential Virtues* is scriptural therapy for mind and life. Like most therapy, it may sometimes be painful. But the stakes are high. So are the standards Peter raises. So is our calling. Just as Jesus commands us to be perfect like our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:45), Peter reminds us that we are called to *God's own glory and virtue* (1:3), to become a *partaker of God's own nature* (1:4). Christianity is not a call to a higher standard or a higher life; it is a call to the highest standard, to a life impossible for us alone because it cuts cross-grain to all our fallen instincts and desires. That's why God has provided all we need in terms of both power and promises (1:3–4) and, in the end, a reward as unimaginable as it is certain (1:11).

Jim Berg's systematic exploration of these essential virtues is practical in the finest sense of the word. He seeks to trail the exegetical data in the text, tracking the path of God's mind in the passage from what He says to what it means for us in terms of our daily choices and actions. His energetic, personable writing style is coupled with an unusual gift for helping the reader translate principle into practice. Best of all, what drives his thinking is not a commitment to morality as an end in itself, but an understanding that we as believers are part of a reality much bigger than what we see around us and a destiny far greater beyond this passing world. He understands that God has destined us to be changed into His image because He has created us for His glory.

Layton Talbert



## PREFACE

God has dug several single-chapter “watering holes” throughout the Scripture’s terrain where thirsty sheep can get an especially long drink of one particular teaching. You are probably familiar with many of them. They would include 1 Corinthians 15, the resurrection chapter; 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter; Hebrews 11, the faith chapter; and James 3, the chapter-length discussion on the tongue. Of course, other chapters in the Bible discuss these topics, but not to the same depth and breadth of these passages. God has seen fit to place a great deal of teaching in one place for certain topics.

The same is true for 2 Peter 1. Here God has dug the largest watering hole on the topic of Christian maturity. It shows us what it takes for us to have a mature knowledge of Christ and what the resulting likeness to Christ looks like in the midst of a morally corrupt culture.

Those of you familiar with *Changed into His Image* know that it sketched out the process of sanctification whereby we are made like Christ.<sup>1</sup> Think of the list of virtues presented in 2 Peter 1 as the portrait of what that Christlikeness looks like. Because of the strategic part these qualities play in our development and demonstration of Christlikeness, I call them *Essential Virtues: Marks of the Christ-Centered Life*.

### A MINISTRY OF REPETITION TO FORGETFUL BELIEVERS

Peter’s audience lived in a world very much like our own. Religious pluralism and cultural corruption abounded. The pagan culture was taking its toll on the believers to whom he was writing, and the church needed an apostolic admonition that called these believers to demonstrate their faith by living distinctively virtuous lives. He warns them—and us—against “any tendency to treat sin lightly, to suppose that an immoral lifestyle can be pursued without any penalty.”<sup>2</sup>

Some who had slid into moral apostasy were now propagating the false teachings of libertine Christianity that justified their sensual lifestyles.<sup>3</sup> Commentator Richard J. Bauckham believes that the attitudes and ethical lapses of the false teachers, especially the immorality, were an “accommodation to the permissiveness of pagan society . . . especially when Christian morality impeded participation in the social life of

the cities. . . . [Christian teaching] seemed to them an embarrassment in their cultural environment. . . . Perhaps [these false teachers] saw themselves as rather daring young radicals trying to clear a lot of traditional nonsense out of the church.”<sup>4</sup> The parallel to today’s climate among both fundamental and evangelical Bible believers is obvious.

The apostolic antidote to such moral corruption is a maturing, Christ-like character; Peter commits himself to the task of promoting the development of that character in their lives for as long as he lives. He even promises that his teaching will reach beyond his earthly time with them through the epistle that we will be studying. Notice Peter’s great burden, recorded in 1:12–15:

Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth. Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance; knowing that shortly I must put off this my [body], even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath shewed me. Moreover I will endeavour that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance.

Peter goes on to assure his readers in 1:16–21 that “these things” (verses 12, 15) of which he is reminding them are not of personal origin but are from God Himself. Libertines must reject authority in order to practice their self-centered and fleshly lifestyles, and Peter must reassert the authority of the Scriptures as messages from God Himself about these matters.

We would do well to take our cue from the apostle. We must never tire of reminding ourselves and one another of the importance of submitting ourselves to the inspired Word of God and to developing a mature Christian character, for “there can be no claims to Christian spirituality apart from possessing a virtuous lifestyle.”<sup>5</sup> Such a personal pursuit of Christian character is not incidental to our Christian experience; it is a primary evidence that Christ does, indeed, dwell in us.

What we have here in 2 Peter 1 then is strategic for overcoming the pull of the ungodly world around us and for resisting the lure of similar libertine false teachings in the church today. Both the world and false teaching appeal to our fleshly nature, and Peter prescribes full-grown

## PREFACE

Christian character as the cure to both. If we are to represent Christ well in this day, we need a generous dose of the antidote—a fuller likeness of Christ stamped on our souls.

So, are you ready for a good long drink from one of God's special watering holes? I hope so. You will be amazingly refreshed and strengthened by Peter's inspired instruction. The primary emphasis of the book you hold in your hand is descriptive. That is, it describes the target we should be aiming for in our Christian experience. The accompanying study guide is prescriptive; it tells you in more detail how to get there. Combined, they will give you the necessary tools you need to develop Christlike character in your own soul and to help you disciple others toward that end as well.

I pray that your study of this passage will be as invigorating and as rewarding as it has been to me. So, if you too are a thirsty sheep, get out your Bible, ask God to teach you His ways, and let's get going. For starters, right now stop to read through 2 Peter 1:1–15.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grace is God's undeserved favor and help to His fallen creatures. It takes many forms. Most notably it was displayed on a cross outside Jerusalem, where God's Lamb was sacrificed for the sins of the world. No gift is more superlative than salvation through Jesus Christ. But God's grace shows up in other forms as well.

God's undeserved help to His fallen creatures is evident in an inspired, written revelation of His will. It is evident in the stability and, therefore, predictability of His physical creation and in the gifts of the institutions of marriage, the home, and human government.

Paul revealed to us that another of God's gracious gifts to us is the church—that body of believers who are given to one another for mutual edification in the ways of Christ and for a witness to a lost world.

I see those men and women who have helped me in the development of *Essential Virtues* as more of God's gracious gifts. Special thanks go to my friends and collaborators in Christ's ministry: Jim Newcomer, Randy Leedy, Sam Horn, Stephen Hankins, and Layton Talbert for their theological input and personal encouragement during the project. Their insight and suggestions were invaluable.

Suzette Jordan, whose editorial skills shepherded the manuscript into its final form, has earned my highest respect and deepest thanks. She and the rest of the BJU Press team are a most gracious gift to the church. Their dedication and sacrifice for the edification of the body are unsurpassed in my estimation.

God's greatest gift to me, after His Son, is my beloved wife, Patty, whose life continues to affect me profoundly. Her love for Christ is lived out daily in our home and in her ministry to others. She more than anyone else I know evidences the *Essential Virtues* of which I write. I pray that this book will have as great a ministry to others as Patty has had to me.

## Chapter One

# THE PORTRAIT OF THE CHRIST-CENTERED LIFE

*And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge [self-control], and to [self-control] endurance; and to [endurance] godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness [love]. (2 Peter 1:5–7)<sup>1</sup>*

## WHY THIS LIST?

Have you ever wondered why the apostles and the Lord Himself present lists of virtues that don't seem to agree? For example, why does the list of virtues in 2 Peter 1 differ from the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 and from the qualities of love in 1 Corinthians 13? Why do even the Lord's beatitudes in Matthew 5 contain elements that are not included in the qualities of wisdom in James 3? Why do some qualities of these various lists overlap while others are unique to one of the inspired lists?

Think of it this way. If you were buying groceries, your shopping list would look somewhat different from the list you would take to a hardware store, though both lists are necessary for the overall well-being of you and your family. There might even be some overlap because you could buy light bulbs or flashlight batteries at either store.

Similarly, the lists of the New Testament support the context in which they are given and the particular burden of the writer. In Matthew 5 Jesus accentuated the characteristics of His kingdom that contrasted with the Judaism His hearers had known. The list in James 3 describes the characteristics of wise speech. First Corinthians 13 is a prism that breaks the white light of love into its individual "colors," or manifestations. The fruit of the Spirit lies in direct contrast to the works of the

flesh in Galatians 5. We must ask ourselves then, what is the context of the list we are looking at in 2 Peter 1? (As you study through this book it will help you to refer to the chart printed on the inside back cover.)

### A PORTRAIT OF THE CHRIST-CENTERED LIFE

Peter is quite clear about his intent. He wants these dispersed former members of his congregation to whom he is writing to come to an intimate knowledge of Christ that will transform them into the likeness of Christ (2 Peter 1:3–4). He describes for them what full-grown maturity in Christ looks like and heralds that maturity as the only antidote to the sensual, lawless appeals of the world and to the libertine false teaching around them. It is also a character that will gain for them a rich welcome into the everlasting kingdom (2 Peter 1:11). In other words, it is a character that is honored much by Christ because it is so much like Him. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones observes, “It is a perfect list; you cannot add to it. He deals with the whole of the Christian life.”<sup>2</sup>

Author Gary Inrig says of this passage, “The character sketch Peter gives is a beautiful portrait of the mature Christian. . . . The qualities which Peter describes are fascinating and provide a powerful basis for personal character analysis.”<sup>3</sup>

These men are right on target. The list of essential virtues provided for us in 2 Peter 1 presents a clear template for our own growth in Christ and for our discipleship of others in the midst of our own morally corrupt culture.

### SIMULTANEOUS YET SEQUENTIAL

The next question before us asks, “Is there a particular significance in the order of these traits, and if there is, must we develop the previous traits fully before we can proceed to the next trait in the list?”

The grammatical construction in this passage indicates there is, indeed, a sequence involved.<sup>4</sup> None of the other scriptural lists repeats the previous trait while exhorting the believer to build the next trait upon it. Notice how several Bible teachers and commentators speak of this arrangement.

Michael Green quotes J. A. Bengel, “Each step gives birth to and facilitates the next. Each subsequent quality balances and brings to perfection the one preceding.”<sup>5</sup>

M. R. Vincent in his word studies comments, “The A.V. exhorts to add one virtue to another; but the Greek, to develop one virtue in the exercise of another; ‘an increase by growth, not by external junction; each new grace springing out of, attempting, and perfecting the other.’”<sup>6</sup>

D. Edmond Hiebert further comments, “Peter lists seven qualities or traits of character in this moral development, and he introduces each new trait as being ‘in’ (en), ‘in connection with,’ the preceding. Each is inherent in its predecessor, which in turn is supplemented and perfected by the new quality, giving it more abundant fruitage.”<sup>7</sup>

Commentator Stephen Paine says, “Their presentation here seems to observe an order from the most elemental to the more advanced, but they are all of them facets of the Spirit’s work in the life of a believer, aspects of the glory of the indwelling Christ, His character shown in the Christian’s character.”<sup>8</sup>

J. Daryl Charles, whose work *Virtue Amidst Vice* provides one of the most detailed exegetical and historical examinations of 2 Peter 1, sees clearly in this list “an ethical progression that builds toward a climax in [love].” Charles rejects the idea that except for saving faith (the first virtue) and love (the last) the rest could have been stated in any order. He says,

Each virtue, a fruit of the life of faith, facilitates the next; none is independent of the others; as is suggested by the . . . syntactical arrangement of vv. 5–7. These virtues cannot stand in unrelated or unconnected juxtaposition. Because of this organic unity, which is rooted in the spiritual realities of faith and the righteousness of Christ, the catalog of virtues in 2 Peter is not largely random; rather, it demonstrates from a Christian standpoint a logical interconnection of virtues, all of which move toward the highest virtue, [love].<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps a good illustration to show what is happening here is to think of how an embryo develops in a mother’s womb. All the parts of the baby are developing simultaneously. The fingers are forming and growing while the lungs are developing along with the arms and torso, and so forth. Yet even though all the parts are developing at a certain rate all the time, there is a noticeable developmental sequence as well.

The first thing we notice in a picture of an embryo is the large head. The brain must develop before the rest of the baby because it will be regulating the growth and development of all the other parts. If the

brain is deformed in some way, we can expect that the rest of the body will show deformities and dysfunction. After the brain the heart begins to develop more fully. It must be prepared to sustain the rest of the body. It also must now supply the demands of a larger brain. We can say that the parts of the baby are developing simultaneously yet sequentially.

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These essential virtues must be cultivated in the power of the Spirit of God upon the foundation of saving faith.

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Christlike character develops in much the same way. All the traits in 2 Peter 1:5–7 are commanded elsewhere in Scripture, but in this passage they form a chain in which every link is necessary. The sequence here teaches us that none of the traits can reach maturity unless the previous supporting traits are maturing well.

Look at the chart inside the back cover of this book and notice their sequence. Do you see how even though we must always show love, no one can really have a full-bodied *love* (the last trait in the list) that “endureth all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7) until he possesses a maturing *endurance*, an earlier trait in the list? Likewise, *brotherly kindness* in the face of the cruelty or thoughtlessness of others cannot be sustained without that same *endurance*.

In a similar manner, no one can have full-grown *endurance* who has not developed a strong measure of *self-control*. He will not endure mistreatment or pressure long if he has not learned first to say no to his own desires and passions. So it is with all the traits, as we shall see in the discussions to follow. Each trait supports the development of the next in the sequence, yet none can be ignored until the previous ones are developed since all are commanded elsewhere in Scripture.

### CAREFULLY CHOSEN WORDS

The words Peter chose to include in this list under inspiration from God were, as mentioned earlier, Greek words in common use in his day. Many of these traits in Peter’s epistle were also included in lists proposed by various Greek philosophers of the day.

For example, the word for *self-control* that Peter uses in this passage had a broad meaning in the first century. Some of that meaning is retained in the Scriptures, but the word took on a specific refined and narrowed meaning when the apostles used it.



The Stoics, a school of philosophy popular at the time of Peter's writing, also promoted self-control. But to them, it was purely a matter of controlling the passions by reason. The apostles taught, however, that control of the passions had to involve much interaction with God if it was to be, indeed, a fruit of the Spirit. The branch must abide in the Vine for fruit to be produced.

To be sure that his readers did not get the common understanding of these words confused with the more specific and intense Christian meaning, Peter introduces each quality with the definite article in the original language. Unfortunately, that word was not brought into most English translations. Verses 5–7 actually read,

Add to your faith *the* virtue; and to *the* virtue *the* knowledge; and to *the* knowledge *the* self-control; and to *the* self-control *the* endurance; and to *the* endurance *the* godliness; and to *the* godliness *the* brotherly kindness; and to *the* brotherly kindness *the* love.

Why is that important? Let me explain it this way. When I was a young boy and needed to be warned about my behavior—which seemed all too often—my mother would remind me that if I disobeyed she would have to get “*the* stick.” Now on our farm we had many kinds of sticks. We had stakes for tomato plants, battens used on barn siding, tree branch walking sticks we boys used when trudging through the shelterbelts, and so forth. Although we had many kinds of sticks, I never had any confusion about what Mom was referring to when she said “*the* stick.” I knew it was the two-foot piece of one-by-two she kept on top of the refrigerator, which she used when necessary to correct one of her three boys when we were disobedient.<sup>10</sup> My point is that when she used the definite article *the*, she was singling out that particular stick from all the other sticks we might be familiar with.

In a similar fashion Peter uses the definite article to point out something unique about his list of virtues. While the Stoic virtues could be developed by sheer willpower, these essential virtues must be cultivated in the power of the Spirit of God upon the foundation of saving faith. He wants his readers to know that he is choosing his words carefully and that they have a specific quality and intensity that he does not want them to miss. We will look at their unique qualities and how they are developed as we investigate each trait.

## THE HARVEST

After Peter lists these essential virtues, he describes the benefits we can expect to reap when we cultivate them. He lists them in verses 8–11. Notice them carefully in the text below.

For if these things [these essential virtues] be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the [full] knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore, the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The goal is for these evidences of the Christ-centered life to be “in you and abound.” That means they are to be personally yours and constantly growing more dominant. The result is several-fold.

### *The Cure for Apathy*

The apostle says that progress in the cultivation of these virtues will mean we will not be “barren.” The Greek word here translated “barren” means stalled or stuck, and therefore, ineffective.

An automobile whose engine has stalled isn’t going anywhere. It will have to be pulled, pushed, or fixed on the spot by someone else if it is to move off the side of the road and get on with its journey.

Such is the spiritual condition of many in the church today. Immature believers who are not advancing in their growth in Christ often have to be pushed or pulled along by someone else. They cannot seem to get going on their own; they appear apathetic.

The stalled Christian may be a teenager with parents and youth pastor who are concerned about his spiritual direction. He may even resist their attempts to check up on him with regard to his devotions, his friends, his failure to keep up with household duties, and his entertainment choices.

The stalled Christian may be a spiritually lukewarm husband whose wife daily begs God to work in his heart to get him “back on the road” where he can lead her and the children in the ways of Christ. He may

get irritated that other men in his church are always trying to encourage him to join them in small group studies to help him make some progress in his Christian life.

Peter is clear that a person who seems “stuck” in his growth is like the embryo that ceases to develop at some point in a pregnancy. A stalled condition is serious for the forming infant in the mother’s womb and is a grave condition for the developing believer as well. It leads quite readily to moral and ethical decline as the stalled believer by default is sucked into the ways of the world around him.

### *The Path to Intimacy with Christ*

Peter continues by saying that the growing believer will be neither stalled out “nor unfruitful in the [full] knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Here is the most wonderful benefit of cultivating these essential virtues. In the process of working on them we will get to know God! For these traits to develop there will have to be much interaction between the believer and his Savior.

Today those who wish to have guidance on improving their physical condition will consult a personal trainer. He is hired to evaluate his client’s current physical condition and map out an exercise, diet, and lifestyle routine that will enhance overall well-being. The trainer will interact with his client daily, if necessary, to insure that he stays on the right track. He provides periods of instruction about various disciplines that must become lifelong habits for long-term health. He is available to answer questions about how certain exercise routines are to be carried out and why certain parts of his trainee’s diet are so strategic to his health. In the process of interacting with his personal trainer over the course of time, the trainee gets to know the trainer quite well. He learns much about the trainer’s personality and interests. He may even become acquainted with the trainer’s family, upbringing, and professional goals. It is quite possible that the trainer takes on more of the status of a close family member or of a personal friend over time.

A similar relationship develops between the believer and Jesus Christ as the believer diligently takes instruction from his Lord and seeks to faithfully carry it out for his own spiritual well-being and for Christ’s glory. Christ is the perfect Trainer! He made us, so He understands our makeup, and He made us for a purpose, so He understands what we must become in order to fulfill that mission.

A believer, however, who stays home from the “gym” can never develop into a “healthy” Christian. But beyond that, he will never get to know the Trainer well if he seldom shows up. If he ignores the instructions and skips the exercise sessions, he can expect to get a call (i.e., a convicted conscience) from the Trainer holding him accountable for his lack of performance. He will begin to see the Trainer as a nuisance to avoid rather than an insightful Coach who really knows what is best. Unfortunately, the relationship will disintegrate.

The Christian, however, who faithfully seeks to develop these essential virtues, will see every circumstance of life as a “fitness station” upon which the Trainer has arranged another repetition of the necessary surrender, dependence, and obedience required to develop and manifest that virtue. As the believer interacts with his Lord, taking instruction, asking for help, receiving encouragement and grace, and so forth, he will learn much about his Trainer. As the relationship develops, the believer will find the Trainer revealing more and more about Himself and His disposition toward and plans for His child.

### *The Key to Discernment*

The apostle reminds us, on the other hand, that the person who lacks these qualities will be “blind, and cannot see afar off.” Like the church of Laodicea, believers who are stalled in their Christian experience (i.e., those who are lukewarm) are “blind” (Revelation 3:17). Peter qualifies the kind of blindness he addresses. The Greek word here translated “cannot see afar off” is the same word from which we get the word *myopic*. It literally means “to shut the eye.”

Peter uses this metaphor of shutting the eye to show the purposeful refusal to look at life with full perception. This is a willful blindness to spiritual matters.

Believers who are not diligently cultivating these virtues of Christ-likeness will be taking on the likeness of the world instead. They willingly focus only on the temporal things right in front of them. They are obsessed with the present—the latest recording hits, the summer’s blockbuster movies, the fall’s television lineup, the current superstars and celebrity fashions, the hottest electronic games, and the season’s ball teams’ standings. From an eternal perspective, these things are entirely irrelevant. Yet the nearsighted believer can’t see

anything beyond the present draw of the world—neither does he seem to want to.

Furthermore, when he faces a trial or temptation, he is focused only on the immediate situation and how he can get relief. He cannot see beyond the trial or temptation to what God wishes to do through it in perfecting Christlikeness—the essential virtues. All he sees is the immediate pain or misery in the trial or the enticing pleasure of the temptation. Consequently, he lives an earthbound and narrowly focused life. He is “blind and cannot see afar off” and has brought on the condition by turning away from the ways of Christ.

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Believers who are not diligently cultivating these virtues of Christlikeness will be taking on the likeness of the world.

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We do not live in an age of wisdom—neither did Peter. Though the philosophies of his day spoke much of wisdom, moral corruption abounded. Similarly today, there is much talk among Christians about exercising discernment, yet there is little difference between them and the sensual, pleasure-seeking culture of our day.

Never before in American religious history have we had more believers turning away from what they call “legalistic standards” in favor of exercising “discernment.” Yet neither have we seen so much immorality and blatant worldliness in the church. Like the victims of false teaching in Peter’s day, many in the church today have been promised Christian liberty but have instead become slaves of corruptions (2 Peter 2:18–19).

Wisdom, as we shall see, is essentially knowing the difference between right and wrong. Solomon understood this (1 Kings 3:6–9). Many, both in Peter’s day and in ours, do not. Peter teaches us that cultivating these virtues will correct this spiritual myopia. The pursuit of Christlikeness is the path to wisdom.

### *The Basis for Assurance*

Peter continues with another warning to the person who fails to cultivate these essential virtues. He says that he has “forgotten that he was purged from his old sins.” Because the things of this world are so much the focus of his life, spiritual and eternal things grow dimmer and dimmer to the point that he forgets he is a redeemed child of God. He lives as if he were unsaved.

His choices are the same choices an unbeliever would make. His ethics, morals, and standards are borrowed from the world around him. He has no sense that he is a citizen of another country (Hebrews 11:13–16) and lives as if the world around him is all that matters. He is worldly—the exact opposite of godly.

Peter does not take this lightly. In fact, in verse 10 he admonishes us to “give diligence to make [our] calling and election sure.” The word *sure* refers to a business transaction whereby the purchaser could show a receipt.

You have probably walked out of a superstore or other retail shop only to have the alarm go off as you exited the building. An alert store clerk may have approached you and asked to see your receipt. He was asking you to produce something that would demonstrate you truly did own the goods you were saying were yours.

Peter is doing the same thing in this passage, saying in effect, “If you do not have these virtues growing and developing in you, and you have no motivation to cultivate them, then you better check to see if you, indeed, possess any saving faith upon which these are built.”

Do you remember in grade school when your teacher gave you a paper cup with potting soil in it, and you planted a bean or corn seed in the cup for a science experiment? You set your cups on the classroom windowsill, and in a few days some sprouts began to appear.

Suppose that nothing sprouted in your cup. Your teacher would say, “I’m sorry, but I guess your seed is dead.” You might even protest, “No, it’s not. I remember planting the seed.”

Regardless of whether you remember planting the seed, your seed is dead. Many believers who show no evidence of growth in Christ still protest that they remember a time when they asked God to save them. Peter, however, wants them to understand that if there is no growth, there is no saving faith. The receipt that they possess salvation is the evidence of some measure of Christlikeness in their life. “Lack of spiritual growth is a sign of spiritual death.”<sup>11</sup> *If there is no desire to develop and no evidence of these virtues, there is no saving faith.* The person has what James called a “dead faith” (James 2:14–26).<sup>12</sup> His greatest need is to bow in repentance before the God he has ignored and accept Christ

as his Savior from his sins. He will then possess an eternal life that will sprout likeness to Christ in him.

### *The Requirement for Stability*

In stark contrast, Peter says, “If ye do these things ye shall never fall.” Of course, he is not teaching a sinless perfection. He is telling us that instead of the ups and downs of a double-minded person, who is “unstable in all his ways” and who is “driven by the wind and tossed” (James 1:6) in his culture, a believer who is pursuing Christlikeness will develop the stability characteristic of those who hear the Word of God and do it (Matthew 7:24–27). When the winds and rains of a depraved culture beat upon his house, it stands firm.

He will know the ways of his personal Trainer because he has spent much time with Him—listening to His lectures, responding to His rebukes and corrections, experiencing the joy of progress, and enjoying His approval and encouragement as well as a healthy life. He will be ready to meet unexpected challenges of life. These things will not set him back. He knows what to do. He is stable.

This is what God promises for the believer whose purpose in life is to know and imitate Jesus Christ. David said that because this man “walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful” but rather “his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night,” “he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season: his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper” (Psalm 1:1–3). This is stability and productivity.

### *The Cause for Expectancy*

Peter ends his exhortation with a wonderful hope! He says to those who cultivated the conditions for the growth of these virtues,

For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.  
(2 Peter 1:11)

The Greek word *ministered* in this verse is the same word translated “add” in verse 5. To those who “add”—generously supply—these essential virtues to their faith, God will “minister”—generously supply—a

full and lavish welcome into His eternal presence upon death. He will most honor those who look most like His Son. He can honor what they are because He Himself produced it in them. They have diligently cultivated the conditions in their hearts—using the means He Himself has provided—for Him to do His work. Nothing pleases the Father more than likeness to His Son.

Most notable is the contrast between the “abundant entrance” promised to the virtuous believer in chapter 1 and the judgment awaiting the morally lax in chapter 3. *The entire exhortation of 2 Peter is toward moral responsibility and godliness in the midst of cultural depravity.* No warning is so chilling, however, as the reminder in chapter 3 that there is coming a moral reckoning when we all must stand before Christ. Peter reminds his hearers—and us—that God knows how to deliver the righteous from corruption in this life and how to deliver the unrighteous to judgment in the next. Consequently, there is no excuse for worldly living. In light of this judgment Peter asks the rhetorical question “What sort of people ought you to be in holiness and godliness?” (2 Peter 3:11 ESV).

This is what Christ offers to those who wish to pursue His likeness. The stakes are high and the assessment points of virtuous living are already established. So, join me as we enter the fitness center of spiritual growth, where we will sit ourselves down on many different workstations to develop the core “muscle groups” of our character. Let’s learn from Christ Himself what repetitions at each workstation will produce in us these essential virtues He is trying to develop in us. Put on your exercise clothes, grab your towel, and let us head out to the floor. We’ve got much work to do.