

Now What? *A Series on Spiritual Maturity*

Who you are: character and virtue

2 Peter 1:3-11 (ESV)

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, 4 by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. 5 For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, 7 and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. 8 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. 9 For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. 10 Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. 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.

The problem

Why is it so difficult to act rightly in the moment?

- I. You get angry while driving because you get cut off by a car
- II. You fail to love your spouse in small meaningful ways
- III. You're first reaction in given situations is anything but noble
 - A. Where is the transformation?

The power

His divine power has granted to us everything we need (3ab)
through the knowledge of his own glory and excellence (3c)

The promise

...by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises (4a)

^ what are these? (3:4,13) Future glory

So that, through them [the promises]... (4b)

You may become partakers of the divine nature (4c)¹

having escaped from the corruption... (4d)

—> theosis vs. fully human

Point: The hope is that you would become fully human, as God designed you to be—free from bondage to sin, in order to live the life of the kingdom. God can enable you, and has indeed promised to do so.

At this point, people stop and hope to glide. Illust: Abby's tricycle.

How we try to handle the problem

Rules vs. Authenticity (and why both of them miss the point)

- If you follow all the right rules, you'll make it.
- If you just "be yourself" you'll make it.

¹ "Peter's thought has to do with moral transformation and not divination or becoming divine men." Gene L. Green. *Jude & 2 Peter*. (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). 186

Why our way doesn't work

Christianity cannot be boiled down to merely following the right rules, or believing the right things. It certainly includes those...but it's more.

1. Rules have no power, they can only point (Rom 7:7; 8:3)
2. Rules point to something, they are not the point (Matt 5:17)
3. Rules don't point out everything. (illust: warning labels only exist when the act has been done)

Neither can Christianity be boiled down to "living authentically"...

API!

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately sick;
who can understand it?

Romans 1:21

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

What if you are authentically angry all the time. Should you be true to yourself?? Lol.
We need more. More than mere rules, and more than spontaneity. The Scriptures offer a better way.

The way of the Scriptures

For this reason (5a)

Make every effort to supplement your faith (5b)

The process

epichoregeo (chorus)

with virtue (5c)

For if these qualities [virtue] are yours and increasing (8a)

You're growing.

You are brought into harmony with God's kingdom.
They [virtue] keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge (8b)
Whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind (9a)

I asked, how do you know your growing. Many: subjective.

e.g., Personal relationship. You can't know. I read my Bible. Etc.

Think about it... is doctrine *evidence*? Is busyness? Attendance?

No. We've met doctrinally sound people who were mean-spirited.

We've encountered selfish people in the lot on the way to attend church!

Bible: virtue!

Since virtue is (among other things) directly tied to my faith and spiritual development...what is it??

(For some, it draws up boring images of a bygone era, full of draconian, puritanical self-righteousness)

Virtue is a type of *character*.

Character is who you are. The automatic responses that flow out of who you are.

It can be good or bad. If you are an angry person, your response to setbacks is gonna be anger.

Living righteously is not automatic. Jer 17:9

It's something you become. Only then do rules help, and authenticity matters.

What is it that you become? What does it look like?

There are endless possible situations in life, and they cannot be determined merely by a rule book.² We must be prepared for those situations before they come. Nor is being “true to yourself” a solution if you are spiritually immature. However, there is a picture of a person who is able to act in any situation according to the power/promises of God's kingdom. It is a type of character.

Virtue is character that has been formed by God's kingdom.

Rules can only prepare you with specialized instructions for specific situations.

“Authenticity” keeps you the same as you are.

Virtue makes you a different kind of person: fruit of the spirit, steadfastness, self-control, faith, hope, love.

Faith, love, steadfastness, humility...these are not rules. (Of course, we will “keep the rules,” but not out of a sense of obligation, but inward character). They are not rules—they each describe a way of life. They are a language. And in every list they are linked together!

How the Scripture's way does work

N.T. Wright - Read from book. 1001x

Not blind obsession to rules, nor merely spontaneous authenticity. For had I been the pilot, thumbing through the “rule-book” or trying to self-actualize, everyone would have died.

No. This is the type of person who has “the ability to do the right thing at the right time for the right reason” (Richard Foster)³

N.T. Wright

Virtue, in the strict sense, is what happens when someone has made a thousand small choices, requiring effort and concentration, to do something which is good and right, but which doesn't “come naturally”—and then, on the thousand and first time, when it really matters, they find that they do what's required “automatically,” as we say. On that thousand and first occasion, it does indeed look as if it “just happens”; but reflection tells us that it doesn't “just happen”...Virtue is what happens when wise and courageous choices have become “second nature.”⁴

Hence, “endurance produces character” (Rom. 5:4)

² N.T. Wright in his magnificent treatment of character and virtue, speaks of character as “the transforming, shaping, and marking of a life and its habits—[one that will] generate the sort of behavior that rules might have pointed toward but which a ‘rule-keeping’ *mentality* can never achieve.” *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010). 7

³ Richard Foster. *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010). 153

⁴ *Ibid.* 20-21

Back to the original question

Do you lack victory in your life over sin?

You might have good intentions, but keep doing that one thing every time.

Think of all the Christians who have fallen yet had good intentions.

Think of the disciples who really loved and followed Jesus, but fled when it got difficult.

Example.

I struggled with anger. I couldn't keep my friends close. I couldn't "turn the switch off" in the moment of crisis. Spiritual experiences didn't do it either. I needed something deeper within.

Answer: But now "make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue..."

^practice the right thing so many times that they become automatic.
More than rules. It's anticipating the kingdom with your habits...
Hence v5a: "for this reason," meaning *cuz the promises!*

You may need virtue.

The result of having practiced the way of Jesus in thousands of ordinary ways yet with difficulty, only to find that when a crisis arose, or you were faced with a test, you reacted as you should and this time it was automatic.

This type of life is a SLOW, HARD PROCESS. It's not going to come from a mountain-top experience. But when your inner life develops, and your outer-life matches, it is a reward in itself. For the longings of your heart are materializing in an ability to live it out as if it were "normal."

Do you lack purpose?

Some of you are asking a different question: why am I here? To kick it until heaven?

Growing in Christ (virtue) is part of your vocation, calling, and ministry.

Virtue is not just a means to an end—it's a part of your worship and mission! It is a sacrifice of praise to your God, and it is a witness of a transformed life to those around you. It is also what forms the forming community of Christ of which you are part. Of all the things we are called to do in this life, virtue is one of the things that will last into eternity!

In Paul's letter of instruction to the Corinthian church on how to use the charismatic gifts like prophecy and tongues, he ends by telling them that, not only are they all worthless *here* apart from love, but that they will all eventually pass away leaving us with the virtues!

[1 Corinthians 13:13 \(NIV\)](#)

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

You aren't maturing in character in virtue to enter a kingdom. You are doing so to be prepared for a kingdom that will be filled with such beauty. Was it not Jesus' way of life, as it saturated his teaching, behavior, and even the small things he did on the fly that captivated people so? They were attracted to him. After all, he was a parable of a better way of life. Just as Jesus was a walking visual of God's kingdom, so we who are being conformed to his image are to those around us. And imagine a world where everyone is filled with Christlike character and virtue.

What better purpose is there than a world where Jesus holds all together? Let him start with you.

So...how do we mature and grow in virtue?

We need transformation of heart and allegiance

v3 - "granted"

v10a - calling and election

The gospel of the kingdom

This way of life has been made available in Jesus.⁵

We need to be persuaded of the kingdom life

v3b - "knowledge"

v11b - vision of the Kingdom

Next two weeks. (fruit of spirit, love)

We need to participate in those habits that mark the kingdom—by the power of the Spirit.

v10b - practice these qualities

- faith
- virtue
- knowledge
- self-control
- steadfastness
- godliness
- brotherly affection
- love

As we said, these are ways of *being*. How do you do them, when you are not that?

Renewal of the mind

AP!

Practicing and developing habits

Participating in community

Healing of the heart

Following two weeks.

This does not happen overnight. Don't look for a simple experience on the carpets to change everything. This is a new way of living. We'll be looking at these things the next few weeks—but it is an ongoing endeavor.

Right now? Let's worship. But not for a quick-fix. Let's do this for a satiating vision of a Messiah who takes broken things and fills them full of life. Who did this by himself suffering and dying at the hands of our distorted world and desires. Who conquered death with love. And now sits at the right hand of the Father as Lord and Judge. Let's stare at him today. That the spark of our affection might catch fire and stay alight.

⁵ "Once again, we remind ourselves that the death and resurrection of Jesus did indeed inaugurate a new pattern of life. Nobody in the ancient world, pagan or Jewish had ever imagined living like this." Ibid. 129