GROWING IN GODLINESS

2 Peter 1:5-7

By

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2 Peter, Lesson 3  

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2 Peter 1:5-7  

The late Ray Stedman told of asking a boy how old he was. Quick as a flash he said, “I’m twelve, going on thirteen, soon be fourteen.” That boy was eager to grow up!

Most Christians want to grow in the Lord, especially when they are new in the faith. But often, as time goes on, the enthusiasm to grow begins to fade. We settle into a humdrum routine and grow spiritually complacent.

We’re like an old farmer I read about (“Our Daily Bread”), who often described his Christian experience by saying, “Well, I’m not making much progress, but I’m established!”

One spring when he was hauling some logs, his wagon wheels sank down to the axles in mud. As he sat there viewing the dismal situation, a neighbor who had always felt uncomfortable with the farmer’s worn-out testimony came by. He called out, “Brother Jones, I see you’re not making much progress, but you must be content because you’re well established!” It was a way of pointing out, “You’re stuck!”

If you’re stuck spiritually, God wants you to grow. Even if you’ve been a Christian for many years, the New Year should be a year of growth in godliness. Until you’re perfectly like Jesus Christ, which won’t happen until you see Him, you still have room to grow. In our text, Peter gives us some wise counsel about growing in godliness.

But you won’t grow without deliberate discipline and effort. It’s interesting that Peter, a man known in the gospels for his impetuosity, here sets forth a deliberate, disciplined approach to spiritual growth. If Peter the impetuous fisherman could become a disciplined, godly man, then anyone else can do the same. He’s saying,

**Because God has imparted new life and spiritual riches to us in Christ, we should be diligent to grow in godliness.**

Let’s look at four practical lessons in these verses:
1. To grow in godliness, make sure that you have trusted in Jesus Christ and His gracious promises.

Peter begins (1:5), “Now for this very reason also....” This takes us back to verses 3 & 4, where Peter told us that when we believed in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, God also “granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness” (1:3). Through the glory and moral perfection of Christ, “He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust” (1:4). “Now for this very reason also,” grow in your faith.

Do you ever marvel at why people don’t just flock to Christ by the droves? He offers complete forgiveness of sins and eternal life as a free gift to all who will believe. What could be better? Why aren’t people lined up at the door of churches all over the world asking, “What must I do to be saved?”

The answer is (2 Cor. 4:4), “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” Or (1 Cor. 2:14), “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.” Or, to use another biblical analogy, before God imparted new life to us, we were dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-3). If you have trusted in Christ as Savior and Lord, it was not because of your keen insight or brilliant powers of logic. It was because God mercifully opened your blind eyes to see (Acts 16:14).

The point is, you cannot begin to grow as a Christian until you have received new life from God through faith in Jesus Christ. It is the life of Christ in you that gives you the motivation and power to change and grow spiritually. The instant you trust in Christ, God graciously gives you the key to the unfathomable riches of Christ (Eph. 3:8), which supplies you with everything you need for life and godliness.

In the list of qualities that follow (2 Pet. 1:5-7), some writers refer to eight virtues, with faith being the first. But I think that is mistaken. Peter does not tell us to supply faith, as he does with the
other things on the list. Rather, he says, “in your faith supply moral excellence,” etc. He assumes faith as the foundation on which the other virtues rest and from which they grow. We receive faith in Christ as God’s gift (1:1), but then we supply the other qualities, which are the fruit of faith (1:8). So, to grow in godliness, make sure that you have trusted in Jesus Christ and His gracious promises. Faith is the essential foundation for growing in godliness.

2. **To grow in godliness, maintain the right motivation.**

I am still focusing on Peter’s opening phrase, “Now for this very reason also….” The reason that we should apply all diligence and supply these seven qualities to our faith is that God has graciously made us partakers of His nature and has granted to us everything that we need for life and godliness through His precious and magnificent promises (1:3-4).

Right motivation in the Christian life is essential! It’s easy to have the wrong motivation. Maybe, for example, you want to grow as a Christian so that everyone will think, “My, what a great Christian he is!” That’s pride, which is the wrong motivation! Or, maybe you want to grow as a Christian so that you’ll be successful in your family life or in business. That may be better than pride, but it’s still wrongly focused on self.

It is right to desire God’s blessing on your life, your family, and your business, but the motivation behind that desire should be, “God, I want Your blessing so that my life will bring glory to Your name! You set Your love on me and saved me when I was in the gutter of sin. You called me out of darkness into Your marvelous light. Now, Lord, I want to grow in godliness so that my life proclaims Your excellencies (1 Pet. 2:9)!"

In other words, God’s grace as shown to us in Jesus Christ is the right motivation for applying diligence to grow spiritually. The apostle Paul said that God’s grace was his motivation for serving (1 Cor. 15:10), “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them [the other apostles], yet not I, but the grace of God with me.” He also sets forth God’s grace as our motivation in Romans 12:1, “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God [which he has been setting forth in chapters 1-11], to present your
bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.” He uses the same pattern in Ephesians, where in chapters 1-3 he sets forth our spiritual riches that God has graciously given us in Christ. Then in the last three chapters he tells us how to live in light of God’s abundant grace.

So, here, Peter is telling us, “To grow in godliness, which will require some diligence and hard work, keep in mind the glorious truth that God has imparted new life to you in Christ and that He has given you all of His precious and magnificent promises to equip you for life and godliness.” That’s the right motivation!

3. To grow in godliness, you must apply all diligence.

Peter says (1:5), “Applying all diligence….” The word “applying” occurs only here in the New Testament and means, “to bring in besides.” The idea is, “God has given you His life and all of His promises. Now, you bring in diligence so that you may grow.”

D. A. Carson explains (Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church [Zondervan], p. 228), “… the dominant biblical pattern is neither ‘let go and let God’ nor ‘God has done his bit, and now it’s all up to you,’ but rather, ‘since God is powerfully at work in you, you yourself must make every effort.’” As Paul said (Phil. 2:12-13), “… work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” In other words, spiritual growth involves God’s resources as the foundation, but also our responsible effort in addition.

“Diligence” sometimes has the meaning of haste or speed, but here it probably means, “eagerness, earnestness, or zeal.” Peter is saying, “Make every effort to add” the qualities that follow (A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, by Walter Bauer, ed. by William Arndt and Wilbur Gingrich, 2nd ed. [University of Chicago Press], pp. 763-764). The word “supply” is an interesting Greek word from which we get our words “chorus” and “choreography.” It referred to a wealthy man who would give everything necessary to put on a stage play or musical performance. It meant to give lavishly, because such donors did not want people thinking that they had been stingy in supplying the chorus. So putting it all together, Peter is saying, “Make every effort eagerly and lavishly to supply these qualities on the foundation of your faith in Christ.”
When I was a younger Christian, I was taught that we are not to exert ourselves or work hard to grow spiritually: “If you’re striving or exerting yourself, you’re not resting in Christ. The Christian life is the faith-rest life. Just rest in Christ and He gives you victory over sin and He produces holiness in you.” Sometimes these writers would appeal to the analogy of the vine and the branches (John 15). The branch doesn’t struggle or strive to bear fruit. Rather, it effortlessly abides in the vine and the life of the vine flows through the branch, resulting in fruit. It all sounds so easy!

But that approach to the Christian life ignores many other Scriptures that talk about struggle and effort on our part. Granted, we struggle and work according to God’s power in us, but still we must struggle and work! As we saw (in 1 Cor. 15:10), as a result of God’s grace, Paul worked hard. In Colossians 1:29, he says, “For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.” (See, also, 1 Tim. 4:10.) Hebrews 12:4 talks about our striving against sin. In many places, the New Testament uses the analogy of warfare or fighting to picture the Christian life (Eph. 6:10-20; 2 Tim. 4:7; 1 Pet. 2:11). Fighting is not effortless! You must exert yourself to the point of exhaustion.

Are you applying “all diligence” to grow in Christ? Do you give it mental effort? Do you make time to grow spiritually? Do you wrestle with where you need to grow? Do you work out a plan to get there? Do you read books on theology or important doctrinal matters that stretch your mind to think about the hard questions in the Bible? If you’re on spiritual autopilot, you aren’t applying diligence. You won’t grow spiritually if you don’t deliberately work at it.

But, what does growth entail? Where should we focus? This brings us to the heart of our text:

4. **To grow in godliness you must make progress in seven areas.**

   Faith is the foundation; to that we must supply moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. This list raises some questions. Why did Peter pick these qualities and not others? Why does he put them in this order? Does he mean that we must work on them in this order, so
that we become proficient in the first one before we start working on number two, etc.?

Many writers point out that these sorts of lists were a common literary form, both outside and within the Bible. Adolf Deissmann (Light from the Ancient East [Baker], pp. 317-318), for example, mentions a first century B.C. inscription from Asia Minor that honors a man for having, “faith, virtue, righteousness, godliness, and diligence” (all of which, except “righteousness,” are in Peter’s list). Paul lists nine qualities as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). He tells Timothy (1 Tim. 6:11) to “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.” Four of those qualities (godliness, faith, love, and perseverance) are in Peter’s list. So Peter’s list here is not exhaustive, but illustrative or suggestive for starters and easy remembrance.

Why did he choose these qualities? Probably, he chose them because they are the opposite of the evil characteristics of the false teachers that he will expose in chapter 2. They did not have moral excellence, or Christlikeness. They claimed to have knowledge, but they didn’t know God, who is holy. They lacked self-control and indulged the flesh (2:2, 10, 14, 18). They were not persevering in godliness, but had gone astray. Rather than demonstrating true brotherly kindness and love, they were simply exploiting people for their own gain.

As for the order in which Peter arranges these seven qualities, some see no logical order, whereas others do. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (Expository Sermons on 2 Peter [Banner of Truth], p.26) sees three headings: (1) the character of our faith (virtue, knowledge); (2) our inward dispositions (self-control, perseverance); and, (3) our relationships to others (godliness, brotherly kindness, love).

I propose that there is a sensible flow of thought that goes as follows: “Faith” is the bedrock foundation. Without faith we are not Christians. “Moral excellence” (virtue) is necessary next, because without that, we cannot have a clear conscience. If we live in known disobedience to God, He will not reveal spiritual truth to us. Thus, virtue precedes “knowledge.” “Knowledge” follows closely, because we must know the Word of God to inform our conscience and guide us in all our thinking and behavior.
But knowing the truth does not help if we do not exercise “self-control” to practice the truth. Thus self-control is next. But self-control on a few occasions will not help if we then yield and ruin our testimony. So we need “perseverance” when trials and temptations come. As we persevere, we develop “godliness,” which refers to living in reverence to God in every situation. But true godliness is not just a private matter between the individual and God. It manifests itself in godly relationships. Thus we need “brotherly kindness” and self-sacrificing “love.”

This is a logical order, not a chronological order. In other words, it would be wrong to think that you must perfect virtue before you go on to knowledge, or gain vast amounts of knowledge before you develop self-control. Rather, they are all interrelated in the manner that I just mentioned. With that as a background, let’s look briefly at the seven qualities.

(1) To your faith, richly supply moral excellence.

We saw this word in 1:3, where it refers to the moral perfections of Jesus Christ. Peter uses it in 1 Peter 2:9 to refer to “the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” It was used “to denote the proper fulfillment of anything. The excellence of a knife is to cut, of a horse to run” (Michael Green, The Second Epistle of Peter and the Epistle of Jude [Eerdmans], p. 67). Since Peter uses it just two verses before to refer to Jesus Christ, we could say that here he means, “Christlikeness.” We are to grow in the character qualities that marked Jesus. Just as He always obeyed the Father and lived to glorify Him, so should we.

(2) To your moral excellence, richly supply knowledge.

This refers to practical wisdom that is gained in the exercise of moral excellence (Green, p. 68). We gain the knowledge of how God wants us to live through His Word. It tells us how to think, how to use our tongue, and how to behave in just about every imaginable situation. As we put this knowledge into use, it helps us to grow to know Jesus Christ better (as verse 8 says).

(3) To your knowledge, richly supply self-control.

This quality is also the final item in the list of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). God works it in us as we walk in the Spirit, but we must also work to practice it. Paul uses the word in reference to
an athlete, who exercises self-control in all things so that he might win (1 Cor. 9:25). It is also a necessary qualification for elders (Titus 1:8). By definition, self-control means that you must go against your impulses or feelings in order to attain a higher goal. An athlete must say no to junk food in order to keep in shape. He must work out when he doesn’t feel like it. It applies to controlling all desires, including greed, sex, food, emotions, and the use of our time. (See my message, “Learning to Control Yourself,” Dec. 31, 2006, on the church web site.)

(4) To your self-control, richly supply perseverance.

This refers to the ability to endure hardship and distress. Thayer (A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament [Harper & Brothers, 1887], pp. 644) defines it as “the characteristic of a man who is unswerved from his deliberate purpose and his loyalty to faith and piety by even the greatest trials and sufferings.” It is often used with reference to suffering (Rom. 5:3; 2 Cor. 6:4; 1 Thess. 1:4; James 1:3). It means that we keep following Christ even when it results in persecution or hardship.

(5) To your perseverance, richly supply godliness.

“Godliness” refers to “a very practical awareness of God in every aspect of life” (Green, p. 70). It refers to awe in the presence of God and the obedience that befits that reverence (William Barclay, New Testament Words [Westminster Press], pp. 106-107). It is “the attitude which gives God the place he ought to occupy in life and in thought and in devotion” (ibid., p. 107).

(6) To your godliness, richly supply brotherly kindness.

This is the Greek word, philadelphia, which means, “brotherly love.” It is the feeling of kindness or mutual understanding and care that should exist among family members. It could apply to how we are to treat every human being, since we are all members of the human family. But it especially refers to the love that we are to show to others in the family of God. We must accept all whom Christ has accepted (Rom. 15:7). We must be “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). We must “do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (Gal. 6:10).

(7) To your brotherly kindness, richly supply love.
This is the Greek, agape, which is a self-sacrificing commitment to seek the highest good of the one loved. Since Peter exhorts us to apply all diligence to supply brotherly kindness and love, these qualities are not spontaneous. We must work at them. We must often go against our feelings of pride or laziness or self-centeredness to demonstrate love for others.

You can practice it each week at church: instead of keeping to yourself, which you may prefer, look for others who may be new or alone and go out of your way to make them feel welcome. If the person is hurting, pray with him. If he seems lonely, arrange to get together later in the week. And so the list that begins with faith ends with love (Gal. 5:6).

**Conclusion**

As we'll see next time, one result of growing in these godly character qualities is that you will be useful and fruitful in knowing Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:8). Because He gave Himself on the cross to save you from God’s judgment, you should desire to be useful and fruitful as His blood-bought servant. But to be useful and fruitful, you must be growing in godliness, which requires diligent effort.

Spiritual growth is a long process, not a quick fix. It’s like a diet or exercise program. It only shows results when you practice it consistently and stick with it over the long haul. If you’re not making much spiritual progress, then you’re not well established—you’re stuck in the mud! Set some spiritual goals for the New Year. Make it a year when by God’s grace, you grow in godliness!

**Application Questions**

1. Where is the balance between “resting in Christ” and “applying all diligence” to grow in Him? How can we know whether our diligence is a work of the flesh or of the Spirit?
2. How can we make sure that our motives for spiritual growth are right? Why are right motives essential?
3. Which of the seven qualities do you most need to focus on in the New Year?