

2 Peter No. 3, “Moving On”

2 Peter 1:3-7

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Text Comment

- v.5 A point we are going to ring the changes on this evening is the connection between Peter’s statement in vv. 2-4 and the verses that follow. So take note of the “For this very reason...” What Peter has said about our receiving from Christ all that we need for life and godliness and about our sharing in the divine nature is the basis for the exhortation that follows in vv. 5-7.
- v.5 The word translated here “virtue” is the same word translated “excellence” in v. 3. In other words, *our* “moral excellence” will be those ways in which our behavior reflects the character of the Lord Christ himself. Jesus was, after all, the true man, the perfect man, the man as all men ought to be. No doubt “knowledge” was something the false teachers talked a great deal about, as the Greeks did in general. But there are many who claim knowledge who have nothing of the kind!
- v.6 “Self-control” was also a quality highly prized in Greco-Roman culture. Lots of people know *that* our passions and desires ought to be under our control rather than our being controlled by them, but if self-control were easier for human beings to exercise there would be more of it in the world than there is. As it happens, self-control has always been in short supply, and the lack of it has always been one of the principal problems of human life. Socrates famously said that no one rejects the best course of action when once he sees it. Aristotle knew that was hogwash. He wistfully spoke of that mature virtue that is beyond man and belongs only to God. [Green, 78] People are always acting against what anyone can see is their own best interest, and we very often see in retrospect how we ourselves have acted against our best interest. Only Christianity faces and has an answer for the problem of human moral weakness.
- v.7 All manner of theories have been advanced to explain why Peter mentions these particular virtues and why he lists them in the order he does. Albrecht Bengel, the great 18th century Pietist commentator, claimed that each step or particular virtue confirms and facilitates the next. The problem is that if you reversed the order, or started in the middle and worked outwards, you could say the same thing. No explanation of the content and the order of the list is particularly convincing. It seems very likely – though we don’t know enough about the false teachers and their teaching to know exactly how this would be the case – he chose them in some part because they amount to a refutation of the false teaching about the Christian life these believers had been receiving from the false teachers, whose influence had prompted Peter to write the letter in the first place. It is perhaps not a stretch, however, to assume that there is some significance to the fact that the list begins with faith and ends with love. [Lucas, 58] “Brotherly affection” is the translation of *philadelphia*. Interestingly, in the Greek usage of the period, the term is restricted to family relationships. Only in the New Testament is “brotherly love” used of

relationships outside the home. But, then, Christians saw themselves as members of the same family and one another as brothers and sisters. This is an interesting example of how much more radical the Christian ethic was than that of the culture of the first century. You were supposed to love those who love you, you were supposed to love your family. The idea that you were to love others, your neighbors, all the people you encountered in the world was absolutely foreign to Greco-Roman thought. There was no universal neighborhood in that society, or, for that matter, in ours today, as there is in the Bible.

“Love” here is *agape*, a term, as you know, given a very specific definition in the New Testament. This is not love evoked because the object of our love is so admirable and worthy; this is love whose origin is found not in the object but in the subject, love that exists in the lover and will be given even *in defiance of* the lack of goodness or “loveableness” in the object of love. It is first God’s love for us, a love that mysteriously originates without explanation in the heart of God simply because God is love and is given without our deserving it at all. We are to love others as God has loved us, sacrificially and selflessly. A good question any Christian ought to be often putting to himself or herself is thus: *who, at this moment in my life, am I loving in the way that God has loved me? Would anybody else think that I am loving him or her the way God has loved me?* If love is the supreme virtue, we ought to be practicing it all the time, especially that love that cannot be explained by the factors that produce most human love in the world: family relationships or gratitude for kindness shown.

I fully realize that I am stopping our reading in the middle of Peter’s thought (indeed, in the middle of Peter’s sentence!). But vv. 8-11 deserve a sermon of their own. As verses 3 and 4 provide the foundation and the motivation for the exhortation of vv. 5-7, so vv. 8-11 describe the result of our obedience to the exhortation and so additional motivations for the same exhortation. In other words, the imperative of vv. 5-7, is bracketed by compelling reasons for our obedience.

You remember, I hope, from your school days *the various moods of the verb*. Mood refers to the particular form of a verb that indicates in what way the action of a verb is conceived. There is, for example, the indicative mood. A mood in the indicative states a fact. “The day is hot; it is raining; I am hungry; Jesus rose from the dead;” and so on. The subjunctive mood represents the action of the verb as not a fact but as a possibility, for example, as an action that may or may not come to pass, or that is contingent – it will come to pass only if certain conditions are met – or as an action that is desired but uncertain. “I hope that you can visit; I wish you could do well on that test; if the gospel is preached through the entire world, Jesus will come again;” and so on. Or the action of the verb can be expressed in the imperative mood, as a command. “Brush your teeth; be quiet; if the unbeliever desires to leave the marriage, let him go” and so on.

Well, countless times in the Bible an argument moves from one mood to another and almost always, *as here, from the indicative to the imperative*, from a statement of fact to a command. We have that movement from indicative to imperative, from statement of fact to command, famously in the Ten Commandments. “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” There is the indicative, the statement of fact. Then follows

one commandment after another: “You shall have no other gods before me.” The statement of fact is the basis for the commandment. God had redeemed his people, delivered them from bondage. It was now incumbent upon them to honor and serve him with their lives.

You have this same movement from indicative to imperative famously and repeatedly in the letters of the Apostle Paul. He is the one who made this grammatical understanding of the Christian life famous. In Romans, for example, he gives us eleven chapters of indicative: a thorough exposition of what God *has done* for us to save us from our sins. Then in 12:1 the imperatives begin. Also characteristically, the relationship between the indicative and the imperative is made perfectly clear by a “Therefore” that announces the imperative. God in Christ has done all this for you; he has given you these remarkable gifts in defiance of your ill-desert; *therefore* you must live in that way that demonstrates your gratitude and honors the Lord who has been so good to you. That grammar – indicatives first followed by imperatives, facts leading to commands, obedience that is motivated by the saving acts of God, may be said to be *the grammar of the Christian faith and life*.

And you have that same grammar here in 2 Peter 1. In vv. 3-4, as we saw last time, Peter explains what Jesus Christ has done for us and given to us. He has provided everything we need in order to live in a way that reflects his own glory and goodness. He has made one fabulous promise to us after another, promises that amount to nothing less than assurances that we can increasingly actually partake of God’s own nature with all the implications of that for our lives and our influence upon the lives of others; that we can be and will be remade after the image of Christ himself. You remember how, in another context, C.S. Lewis famously reflected on these promises of godlikeness.

“It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. [*The Weight of Glory*, 14-15]

Well, here Peter is not talking first about others partaking of the divine nature, *but of you doing so*. Of you eventually becoming such a person that were others to see you now as you will someday be, if others were to listen to you talk today as you will someday talk, and observe your behavior as some day you will behave, they would be sorely tempted to fall at your feet and worship you as some kind of god. *That* is astonishing. We know ourselves well enough to know that no one is tempted to worship us as we now are, for the life we now live, for the character we now display. But such is the grace and power of God that someday it will be obvious to everyone that we have come to partake in visible ways in the very nature or character of God himself! *That is all in the indicative!* That is all a statement of fact by the Apostle Peter and by the Holy Spirit, whom he will say in v. 21, stands behind and guarantees the truth of what the Prophets and Apostles wrote in Holy Scripture.

But if those astonishing and glorious and arresting promises of divine provision leading to magnificent and eternal transformation – for one thing we know about the divine nature is that it does not degrade or wither or lose its energy – I say, if those promises are true – and all of God’s promises have been made “Yea and Amen” in Christ; absolutely certain of fulfillment – then it is perfectly obvious that *these facts have tremendous and obvious implications for our daily life right now*. Everyone knows how wrong, how disgusting, how utterly iniquitous it would be for someone to receive fabulously valuable gifts – gifts he or she did not and could not have deserved – and then treat with contempt or indifference the one who gave them. If the gifts cost the giver dearly – as these gifts did – this is all the more true.

This is the gist of Peter’s “For this very reason” that begins v. 5 and its imperatives: “make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue” and so on. Now, many of you have heard all of this before. Indicative then imperative, we were saved with a view to a life of gratitude to God, love for God, and the service of God; or, as Paul puts it in Romans 7:4:

“... [Christ] has been raised from the dead *in order that we may bear fruit for God.*”

But it is precisely here that Christians go wrong, that you and I go wrong times without number, in fact, it is probably not an exaggeration to say that you and I go wrong right here *every day of our lives*! And, as a result, we think about our Christian life in some other way than Peter teaches us to think about it here: with the indicatives of God’s grace sustaining and animating and empowering our obedience to God’s commandments. And lest we think, “Ho hum; I’ve heard all of this before,” consider that *this failure to take all of this to heart day by day* may be, probably is the principal reason for the weakness of your Christian life. And we know, don’t we, that our lives of faith and godliness are weak, far weaker than they ought to be, far weaker than they might be!

Half of the time we forget about the indicatives and become self-helpers, forgetting the provision the Lord has made for our life of faith and draw little or nothing from that wonderful provision. We break the connection between indicative and imperative and so lose the motivations and the power the indicatives supply. No wonder we are weak! At other times we forget the imperatives. The fact that God’s grace in our lives and his exceeding great and precious promises are meant to encourage and motivate our obedience and our pursuit of godliness. But we rest content with God’s gifts and do not use them for the purpose for which they were given. We do far too little to supplement our faith. Wouldn’t you agree, knowing your own life as you do, that you are making both mistakes all the time: either forgetting where the power comes from in the Christian life or forgetting to get on with it!

Remember, Christians weren’t the only ones in the first century and are not the only ones today to recommend virtue or even to list various moral qualities that people ought to seek to incorporate in their daily living. We’re getting moral lectures all the time in our culture. I told you last Lord’s Day that I have been reading a new religious biography of Benjamin Franklin, a study of the founding father’s religious thought and life by Thomas Kidd, professor of American History at Baylor University. Franklin was raised in a Christian home, but already in his teens he had rejected the faith of his upbringing. His sister Jane, with whom he maintained an active

correspondence throughout his life, remained a devout Christian and, as you know, Franklin also became fast friends with George Whitefield, the Great Awakening evangelist. In fact, printing Whitefield's journals and sermons, in tremendous demand in mid-18th century America, made Franklin a wealthy man. Both his sister Jane and George Whitefield made no bones about their concern for Franklin's lack of faith in Christ, but Franklin remained all his life unpersuaded.

The fact is Franklin thought he could live a virtuous life without the new birth, without faith in Christ, and without the internal ministry of the Holy Spirit. Hundreds of millions of people in the world think the same way. He would imitate both Jesus and Socrates, he said. I had not realized that it was Franklin who in his *Poor Richard's Almanac* popularized the saying, "God helps them who help themselves." His was a form of "secular pietism." [160] But what was virtue for Franklin? Well, it was the conventional ethic of 18th century American Puritanism minus the doctrines of sin, redemption, and both gratitude and obedience to God. As D.H. Lawrence, the British author would write scornfully in 1924, Franklin's ethics were the ethics of business and capitalism. [161] You can see this clearly enough in Franklin's book, *The Way to Wealth*. He was one of the early "health and wealthers". For Franklin the value of virtue was that it pays! But two great questions remained: who was to say what is and is not true virtue. Franklin seemed to assume that it was obvious, but then there were many who disagreed with him, not least American Indians and Franklin's wife! And, then, could human beings actually rise to the practice of virtue by their own effort. Even Franklin from time to time expressed his doubts. Franklin is a classic example of the imperatives cut loose from the indicatives. It proved in the 18th century as it proved in the first and is now proved in the 21st, a failed project – to put on virtue without a basis for virtue. Pithy proverbs and maxims, such as Franklin was famous for – e.g. "a penny saved is a penny gained" – were no match for human selfishness, man's propensity to violence, his lack of self-control, and his moral stupidity.

To make matters worse, Franklin was a classic example of that arrogant condescension typical of the self-righteous. He himself was careful not to advertise the full measure of his unbelief and counseled his other rationalist friends to do the same; to hide their unbelief. "Don't let them know how much you do not believe," he would tell them, "it will hurt your influence, it will hurt your reputation." He was sure that *he* could be a righteous man, a very good man, without religious conviction and without the aid of the Holy Spirit, but he wasn't similarly confident in the common people; people not as smart as he was. They needed the crutch that he did not. In any case, Benjamin Franklin serves as a polite example of a man embracing the imperatives without indicatives.

The other day a very distressed woman came into the church office. She was in tears. She was despairing. She was, she said, sick and tired of being alone and afraid, afraid because she had no idea where to find help. She had just got out of jail a few days before; she had been in jail frequently she admitted, usually for parole violations. She was, she also admitted, a heroin addict. In fact she was now using meth simply to maintain some control. We went through a long list of agencies and ministries that offer help to people like her – a meal, a place to stay, some counseling, etc. – but, according to her – and she seemed to have personal knowledge of all of them – they were either full and wouldn't be able to help her until a bed opened in their facility or had requirements that she couldn't meet. She used the office phone to call her father who it seemed was unwilling to come and get her. On the phone she was alternately desperately

begging him for help and angrily accusing him of parental dereliction of duty. If she was hoping to persuade her father to help her, she went about it all the wrong way. Here was the mirror opposite of Benjamin Franklin, the polite, successful, well-educated lover of virtue who became what many Americans aspired to be themselves. She was a mess in every way, a failure whose lack of self-control had taken her down to the bottom rung of American life. What was lacking was not the imperatives. No one would think it likely that she could become successful and virtuous simply by telling her to shape up, to begin to do responsible things, to keep the law, get a job, and take a bath. To tell her to add knowledge, self-control, and steadfastness would be the counsel of despair.

What this poor woman also lacked was not the imperatives but the indicatives, the wherewithal that would enable her first *to want to fashion* a different life for herself, the knowledge of where such a life might be found, where it comes from, then to believe that such a different and better life was possible, and, finally, to inspire her to undertake the effort to trust Christ and to repent of her sins and to begin to live in obedience to God. What she needed was to know that in Christ she could have a father who loved her and would always care for her, who was willing to forgive all her sins and give her a new life, a better life. She needed to know that in Christ she had a glorious future awaiting her and that, meantime, she was provided with all that she would need to live a life of love, of freedom, of faithfulness, and of self-control. She needed to know that in Christ she would never be alone again. She not only had God with her always, but would belong to a large family of brothers and sisters who would love her and care for her as she would love and care for them. What she lacked Christ would give her: freedom from sin, knowledge, inspiration, hope, power, and love. Anything becomes possible for a person – no matter a person's past – who knows *Christ and has his provision!*

But any sharp-sighted Christian can see himself or herself in either one of these people – Benjamin Franklin or this desperate young woman – and both of them much of the time. We have forgotten or are ignoring at this particular moment or that either the indicatives – what God has done for us and given to us and promised us in Christ – or the imperatives – we are duty bound to pursue this life with might and main, the life that ought to flow naturally from Christ's gifts to us and provision for us.

This grammar of faith – the indicative leading to the imperative – is vitally important; not only to the understanding of the Christian understanding of salvation and life but to the daily practice of that faith and life. *God never asks us to do anything until he has first reminded us of what he has already done for us and what he has promised.* Our entire understanding of the human situation is that *before man can do anything* that is pleasing to God *he must have received something* from God! [Lloyd-Jones, *Expository Sermons on 2 Peter*, 23-24] God alone can make the Christian life possible and God alone can provide us with motivations powerful enough to sustain the effort that is required to live that radically demanding life.

As one preacher illustrates this, what God has given us is the farm. He has given us the fields, the soil, the rain, the equipment, even the seed and the fertilizer. He has given us the knowledge the farmer requires. We know when to plow, when to plant, when to water, and when to reap. We know how to run the tractors and the harvesters. He has given us the muscles and the energy farm work requires. What he requires of us, all he requires of us *is that we farm.* There is no use

in telling a man to farm who has no land, no equipment, no seed, and no idea as to what farming requires. But, if the man or woman has been given all of that for the purpose of his raising and harvesting a crop, then it is obvious that such a man, such a woman ought to be expected to farm. He was given the farm in order to farm. [Lloyd-Jones, 24]

Do you see? God has given us everything we need to grow deeper and higher in the Christian life, to become more like Christ himself, to put our sins to death and to bring our new life in Christ more and more into expression. We have the knowledge: we know what to aim for and by what means we ought to cultivate Christian graces in our lives. We have the instruments of Christian growth that, if rightly used, must take us further: Holy Scripture, prayer, Christian worship and fellowship. We have the inspiration and motivation to undertake the work: the love of God, the sacrifice of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit with us, and the hope of glory. It is true: *Christ has given us everything we need!* Why did he do that? Because he wants us to put all of that provision to use and to aspire to be more and do more as his disciples. He's given us a farm; he naturally expects us to farm!

What we have here is a tremendous call to action. Peter is summoning us to *effort*, to *action*, and to the execution of a *determined program* of spiritual growth leading to ever greater measures of Christian maturity. Can you say that anyone inspecting your life – your life within and without – will immediately see that you are heeding Peter's exhortation and doing so in the confidence and with the provision that Christ has supplied you? We may hang our heads, knowing how much more of this there ought to be in our daily lives – how much more farming – but the point is not to rebuke but to console and inspire. We all must be reminded from time to time what the Christian life consists of and how it is to be lived. And that is what Peter is doing here.

A cynic who had obviously observed many Christians once described the Christian life as “an initial spasm followed by chronic inertia.” [Green, 76] Not so for us, brothers and sisters, however short or long our Christian life so far. There is more to do, much more; more to become, much more; more virtue, more knowledge, more self-control, more steadfastness, more godliness, more brotherly affection, and more love. We will not in this life and in this world become full partakers of the divine nature. That will be ours only in heaven. But that is not to say that we cannot become much more partakers of that nature than now we are.

Set some goals for yourself, goals specific to your own life and situation. Identify where you need to add to your faith this particular piece of godliness or that. And then inventory your spiritual toolshed, all that the Lord Jesus has given you with which to build a holier life. And then set to work, keeping track of your progress. Do what Nehemiah did who accomplished a great deal for the Lord in his life, and a great deal of it when he was an older man. His rule of progress seems to have been first to pray, then to act, then to pray again, act again, and so on.

The prayer will keep the indicatives fresh in your mind; the action will keep the imperatives front and center, and the constant repetition will keep the grammar of faith present to your mind: first the indicatives, then the imperatives. First Christ's provision and promises, then our obedience. God's grace, remember, does not make our effort unnecessary; it makes our effort effective!