

The Gift of the Knowledge of Christ

People's last words before they die can tell us something about who they were in life. For example, the French grammarian, Dominique Bouhours, is reported to have said, "I am about to – or I am going to die. Either expression is correct."

James Rodgers, a convicted murderer, was facing a firing squad in Utah. He was asked if he had any last request. He said, "Yeah, bring me a bullet-proof vest."

Renowned chemical scientist, Michael Faraday, was asked by his wife, as he lay dying, what he thought he might find to do in the afterlife. He replied, "I shall be with Christ, that is enough."

James Polk, the 11th President of the United States, holding his wife's hand on his deathbed, said, "I love you Sarah. For all eternity, I love you."

We begin today a study of the second letter of Peter. It is, in many ways, his last formal communication with the early Church, which he had served since its inception some 30 years or so earlier. It is written from Rome, where he was in jail, awaiting imminent execution. It is sent, most likely, to the same churches as his first letter which was sent to the churches of the Roman provinces of Asia Minor, today the country of Turkey. The words of a man facing death have an urgency and a deep emotion. Over the next several months, I pray that you will not take these words lightly, but understand the passion and the purpose with which they were written.

Today we'll examine just the first eleven verses and what we see Peter saying first is:

I. Remember Your Spiritual Beginnings.

Interestingly, the first readers of this letter lived in a society not that different from our own. You say, "What? They lived in 64 A.D.?!?! They had no electricity, no cars, no computers, no Pokemon GO. How can you say they lived in a society like ours?"

Okay, they didn't have a lot of the 'stuff' we have. But if you were a Christian back then, you faced a world with similar benefits and similar challenges. All Christian churches in the Roman Empire had the benefits of freedom of movement provided by Roman roads. They also had political peace through the Pax Romana. They had relative wealth, freedom from hunger, and even public entertainment. Maybe not Pokemon GO! but public baths, sports and theater.

And along with these benefits, if you were a Christian, you had values that were in direct conflict with the society at large. Evidence of this is that when a massive fire swept through Rome in 64 AD, Nero, the Emperor, blamed the Christians. The Roman historian, Tacitus, wrote about it:

...Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated by the populace for their abominations, called Christians.¹

So, in Peter's first letter to the churches of Asia Minor, he encouraged them to endure these persecutions with their eyes set on the future when Christ would return. He wrote:

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while... you have been grieved by various trials... (I Peter 1:6)

Now, in this second letter, Peter reminds them of their heritage, their very beginnings. He writes:

...To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus our Lord: May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ. 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, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises... (II Peter 1:1-4a)

Do you hear his opening words to these “cultural twins” of ours? He’s reminding us that God, through Christ, has opened our eyes to see real life, not the false life being offered to us by our culture. Through the knowledge of who Jesus really is, we, with them, have become the recipients of the promises of God.

And what do these promises provide for us? V.4b:

...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.

This is an incredibly important verse in understanding what happens when you become a Christian. You become a ‘partaker’ of the divine nature. What does that mean? The Greek word here is *koinovoi*, which literally means “one who takes part in something with someone.” So, to become a ‘partaker of the divine nature’ doesn’t mean that your ‘sin nature’ is removed and is replaced with a ‘divine nature.’ No, you still have a sin nature but, when you become a Christian, God adds Himself, by His Spirit, to your nature. So now you literally have two natures at war inside of you.

Some of you are saying, “Whhhhat???” Let me give you an illustration. In your body, there’s a war going on. You have antigens and antibodies. These are circulating in your bloodstream. Antigens are the bad guys that cause disease. The antibodies are the good guys that attach themselves to the antigens and destroy them. So, when the antibodies are winning, you’re “healthy” and when the antigens are winning, you’re “sick.” If your antibodies are weakened or the antigens super strong, you have a disease that may require an injection of more antibodies to fight the spread of the bad guys.

Now spiritually, we are born sick with spiritual antigens in control. When we become followers of Jesus Christ, we spiritually receive an injection of the divine ‘healthy’ nature, full of antibodies. But all the spiritual antigens aren’t destroyed; they’re just kept under control, which is what makes you spiritually healthy. When a Christian dies, all the antigens are destroyed and only spiritual antibodies remain.

Peter could not use this illustration because he didn’t know about the cellular world. But this is just another example of the truth of Rom. 1:19 and 20 which say:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, (Watch this!) his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived... in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

If you’re not yet a follower of Jesus, look at the natural world. Look hard! The evidence is there! Albert Einstein said, “Look deep into nature and then you will understand everything.” Christians, remember your spiritual beginnings! This is where hope also is born. Secondly, Peter urges the persecuted Christians to remember that...

II. Salvation Is a Lifestyle, Not Just a Decision.

In verses 5-8 he writes:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with

steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. 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. (II Peter 1:5-8)

So, what is he talking about? When he says ‘...*supplement your faith,*’ is he saying that faith in Jesus isn’t enough to save us? What about Eph. 2:8, 9 that say:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Without using the words, Peter is describing the relationship between ‘justification’ and ‘sanctification.’ Justification is the work of Christ by which we are saved. Jesus died once and we activate the impact of His death only once in our lives. We do that when we confess our sin and ask Jesus to forgive us.

But sanctification isn’t a one-time act, it’s a process. It’s a work that continues until we meet Jesus. Sanctification is our partnering with the Holy Spirit, not only to remain spiritually healthy but to become spiritually stronger. Justification changes my legal standing with God from guilty to forgiven. Sanctification changes my lifestyle from being spiritually barren to being spiritually fruitful.

Think of it like a child growing up. How do you know if a newborn infant is healthy after two months? They should be bigger, right? They should be growing. And as the years go by, it’s not just physical growth that you measure, but behaviors and thinking skills and even emotional maturity. Paul said in I Cor. 13:11:

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

Isn’t it sad to see an adult acting childish? Like a young adult male riding a kid’s bike with his baseball hat on sideways and hanging out with 9- and 10-year-olds. Or what if you dropped off your daughter at college and her roommate had gotten there first and set up her dollhouse with Ken and Barbie and little Princess characters all over the room. What would you think? I mean, you see that and you think, “That’s just not right! Honey, you gotta grow up.”

This is what Peter is talking about here. He lists seven character traits that, some commentators have pointed out, could be considered progressive. In other words, your spiritual life starts with faith and then you progressively add virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection and love. Peter doesn’t specifically say it’s progressive and he doesn’t say that these are the only character traits that define spiritual maturity. But these seven traits should not be absent from a mature Christian and, if the opposite of these exist, well, then there’s trouble. So, let’s look at these seven growth traits and their opposites:

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| 1. Virtue/moral excellence | 1. Immorality/dishonesty |
| 2. Knowledge (of God) | 2. Ignorance (of God) |
| 3. Self-control | 3. Unstable, out of control |
| 4. Steadfast/enduring | 4. Wavering/disloyal |
| 5. Godliness | 5. Worldly/profane |
| 6. Brotherly affection/kindness | 6. Insensitive/harsh |
| 7. Love/agape | 7. Offensive/uncaring |

Now, just for fun, let’s do this. Think of people who are running for public office; even our two candidates for president. From which list do they demonstrate the most traits? Now, this is a measure of spiritual maturity, and spiritual maturity isn’t the only qualification for someone

running for public office. But if you want to know whether someone is spiritually mature or not, this is how you should measure it, not by whether they say they are a Christian or not.

But let's take a chance and make this examination a bit more personal. Where do you find more of your own traits – from list A or list B? And as we said earlier, it's not just a matter of where you are now, but where you were on these lists a year ago or ten years ago? Which list is becoming more dominant in your life?

Peter in verse 9, sums it up for us:

For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. (II Peter 1:9)

Now, let's be clear here. Peter is not saying that a person who was once cleansed from his sins can become UNCLEANSED – can become a non-Christian. He's not saying you can ever completely fall from grace. No, he's saying that you can become spiritually blind, if you stop growing spiritually. If you stagnate, you'll be unable to see God's path before you.

Anybody here unable to see God's path right now? You're confused about what's right and what's wrong. You read what the Word of God says, but you basically don't agree with what it says. Or, as you look at these two lists, if you're really honest, you have to admit that your life isn't growing with more examples of behaviors from list A, but rather more behaviors from list B. If you're not happy with the direction of your life right now, what should you do?

Verse 10 says:

Therefore, brothers, (Greek plural can mean 'brothers and sisters') be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. (II Peter 1:10)

What does it mean "*to confirm your calling and election*"? I think most of you know that I firmly believe that God has granted us free will in this world, which means He loves us but He also respects us. He does not force us to receive His grace and mercy. We have freedom to receive it or not receive it.

But, we have to be careful how we speak of our salvation. Our salvation is totally the work of God. Sometimes we talk about that as if we had brought it about by "CHOOSING" to receive it. That would be like my receiving an invitation from the President to come to the White House for dinner and then telling my friends, "Yeah, next week I'm busy because I chose to have dinner with the President." No, I didn't 'choose' anything. He chose to have dinner with me!

So, when Peter urges us to be '*diligent to confirm*' our calling and election, what he's saying is this: *God is anxious to produce the spiritual fruit of virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection and love in your life. He's anxious to produce that in you. Don't blow Him off! He wants to personally coach you in these life skills. Accept His advice. Show up for the coaching sessions! Do the drills! You can acquire these character traits IF YOU PRACTICE THEM!! If you don't, you'll gradually lose your spiritual vision. A lot's at stake. Be diligent!!*

Dr. J. Vernon McGee says it's like marriage. He writes:

I've been married a long time. I never have to lie awake at night and wonder whether or not I'm married. But to make my marriage meaningful, I have to work at it, and I have been working at it for a long time.²

Ephesians uses this same analogy, saying that we are the Bride and Jesus is the Groom. In Romans it says that Jesus will never divorce us; nothing can separate us from the love of our Groom. Even if you walk away from Him, He will not divorce you.

But if you ignore Him, if you disrespect Him, if you refuse to take His advice, if you refuse to talk to Him or walk with Him, you won't have a healthy marriage.

But if you are “*diligent to confirm*” your marriage, if you will “show up,” spend time, work out with Jesus, your marriage will change. These seven traits will become true of your life with Jesus. And gradually, they will become true of you. You'll have stamina like you never had before. You'll have understanding and wisdom; your life will be “under control,” not “out of control;” you'll be honest and open and affectionate and drawn toward godliness. And you'll fall in love with Jesus all over again.

And may I make one more observation: If your human marriage has fallen on hard times, this will change that, too. When you became a Christian, you made a vow to Jesus and He made a vow to you. Even if you break your vow to Him, He will never break His vow to you, and that is where your salvation lies. Romans 8:35, 38, 39:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ...neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It's because of Christ's tenacious love for you that you are saved. If your spouse divorces you, you have to accept that. But for your part, are you not called to love them as Christ loves you, with tenacity?

And if we will respond to Christ's tenacious love, Peter promises an incredible result: **For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (II Peter 1:11)**

All Christians, faithful and unfaithful, will be welcomed into Christ's eternal kingdom, but some will be “richly welcomed.” This term in the Greek was used to describe the welcome Olympic medal winners received back in their hometowns when they got back home. All Christians will make it home. Those who are richly rewarded will be the ones who had a rich and healthy ‘marriage’ relationship with Christ here on earth. How healthy is your relationship with Jesus today?

[I turn it back now to your campus pastor for his concluding words...]

Does your spiritual marriage need refreshing? Jesus is ready and anxious to work on it together with you. All He needs to hear is you saying, “Yes. I want to grow deeper with You.” Will you tell Him that now? Let's pray...

¹ Tacitus *Annals* XV

² Dr. J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, Vol. V, (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 724