

THE UNFOLDING OF FAITH

II Peter 1:5-7

Peter has been reminding his readers of the promises to and privileges of the Christian. In recalling something of the wealth that is possessed by those who are in Christ, he wrote: "His divine power hath granted to us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature." The abundant provision of God's grace is made available to believers in and through Christ, and is administered to them by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Looking back, we see that we have come a long way. Looking around, we see that we are in the midst of a great and glorious inheritance. Regardless of how great may be our privileges, or how high our attainments, God's Word does not permit us to think that we have reached the goal of perfection. Every gift received constitutes a great challenge, and every achievement made is but the occasion of a new departure.

Note that the series of graces mentioned in our text begins with faith and ends with love. Why does the list begin with faith? Because faith is the foundation of all; it is the soil out of which all the flowers of grace grow. Faith is the ground of action, the foundation on which the structure of life is built. Faith is the belief which is the beginning of right relations with Christ, and the daily trust which is the very breath of the Christian life. Faith is something already present, to which the other graces must all be added. Note that the series ends with love. Faith is the foundation of character, and love is its consummation.

After one has obtained faith and been made a partaker of the divine nature, he should make a worthy response in spiritual growth. Growth means to increase in size, strength, or maturity. If growth is to take place, proper care and nourishment must be provided. When growth ceases, decline begins. The laws of growth and decline always apply in the physical, mental, and spiritual realms. The spiritual life may be regarded as a germ which is expanded by effort; one step leads to another, and each step is made by the cooperation of the human will with the divine will.

Before one is converted the word to him is "come", and as soon as he is saved the word to him is "go." "Come unto me" is Christ's appeal to every sinner; "go on to maturity" and "go into all the world" with the message of salvation are the commands of the Lord to every Christian. Come to Christ for salvation, and then go to the unsaved with the message of salvation.

Christian character is not a loose and variable aggregation of excellencies, but it is a closely-compacted whole. Each grace is firmly linked into that which goes before, so that we have a chain. To our Christian faith must be added certain qualities that will enable us to be fruitful. No Christian can please and honor the Lord unless and until he is willing to add to his faith as the Holy Spirit directs in the passage before us. This holy addition must be done with all diligence. It cannot be done half-heartedly. Note that faith is the foundation and love is the culmination, and every grace between them springs out of faith and is intended to be expressed ultimately in love. These graces cover all of our relationships and attitudes. For this reason they are exceedingly important.

I. Virtue. Furnish your faith with quality.

"In your faith supply virtue." This term "virtue" is not used here in the modern sense, as an expression of chastity or purity. Rather, it is in the old Roman sense

of the manly quality of valor, or courage, or strength. It is that strength derived from the consciousness of right, which gives the boldness to defend it and the steadfastness to maintain it. Those who add virtue to their faith nerve themselves for every emergency. They show a manly and vigorous energy in rising above discouragements and in maintaining their Christian integrity in times of trial. They are ready to brave dangers, endure hardships, encounter adversaries, and stand steadfast when the truth is assailed.

Virtue manifests itself in determining what outward things are to do for us. Virtue enables a Christian to master circumstances and to make them subservient to the highest ends. It gives that sense of sufficiency which enabled Paul to say: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." Virtue is that practical energy which resides in the will, and which is necessary to carry faith into action. For convenience, we may call it the grace of doing. When we have this energy of the soul, this practical determination, then we have a strong bridge between believing and good living, between faith and works.

The stalk, the flower, and the fruit of Christian character and conduct spring from the root of faith. Virtue is in faith, as the flower is in the seed. A tree makes an addition to itself each year by mastering the material which is external to itself, transforming it, lifting it to a higher level, and making it a part of itself. Likewise, a child grows from birth to the stature of manhood by feeling, desiring, thinking, willing, and acting. Even so, every Christian is called upon to add to his faith the manliness and the excellence which were exhibited in the noble character of Christ. Therefore, furnish your faith with quality.

The strength of your faith is in Christ, but its quality is in your obedience to Him in Whom you say that you trust. If you really have faith in Christ, then you will be ready to act in such a manner that the very activities of your days will demonstrate your faith in Him. You will furnish your faith with a quality which will make it evident. In this, as in many other realms, it is always better to go for quality, even though it costs more. Furnish your faith with quality.

II. Knowledge. Furnish your mind with truth.

"And in virtue knowledge." The first outcome of genuine faith is manly energy, which is strong because it lays hold on the Source of all strength: without which we shall neither be able to resist nor to act. It is evident that practical and not speculative knowledge is meant here -- that is, knowledge in relation to character. What is knowledge in respect to character? It is discrimination or discernment. Many a man, who is practical and energetic enough, loses all the good of his energy for lack of discernment. To practical energy must be added practical wisdom. Knowledge here literally means insight, understanding, or prudence. It means a quick perception of what is the right thing for a Christian to say or to do at the moment and under the circumstances. Since spiritual knowledge is firsthand and is gained through acquaintance with God, it must precede obedience to Him. No one can walk in an intelligent manner nor do what God wants him to do without a growing knowledge of God. Knowledge of God -- His person, His Word, His ways, and His will -- does not come all at once, but it is a matter of growth. This is what Paul meant when he wrote to his young friend Timothy and said: "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (II Timothy 2:15). Furnish your mind with truth.

III. Temperance. Furnish your body with mastery.

"And in knowledge temperance." Knowledge is pernicious unless it leads to self-restraint or self-control. Ordinarily, when we think of temperance, we think of refusing to have anything to do with the use of intoxicants. Actually, the word

has a much wider significance and meaning in the Scriptures. There it applies to every appetite, fancy, and purpose that a person can cherish. It means self-control, or the control of inner enemies. Self-control is the grace of abstaining from all kinds of evil to which we are tempted. However, it is not mere abstention from something, but wise management of self.

Out of the knowledge which virtue produces should come self-control. One may have a keen sense of discernment, and yet not act wisely. It is not enough just to know what is best; we must do it. Discerning between the evil and the good, and between the good and the better, should lead us to a vigilant self-control, that we may ever avoid the doing of the evil, and always choose the best. Virtue and knowledge, or strength and insight, are of little value unless we practise that self-control which is the logical outcome of true knowledge. It is important that we learn what the Christian ideal of life really is, and also both the things that help and hinder the growth of that life. Then, we must use what will help us to live a Christlike life and avoid the use of all things that will hinder or prevent us from living such a life. We should use those things which will help us to glorify God, and shun whatever incapacitates us for such service. We are to use things, but we must never allow things to use us. Never let the world master you. Furnish your body with mastery, ever remembering that the secret of self-control is Christ-control.

IV. Patience. Furnish your spirit with patience.

"In your self-control patience." Whereas self-control has to do with the control of that which is within us, patience has to do with the control of that which is external to us, or our circumstances. A man without self-control is at the mercy of his own lusts, and a man without patience is at the mercy of circumstances. The relation between the two is very apparent. Self-control is the grace of holding back, and patience is the grace of holding on. Self-control holds back when lust urges on, and patience holds on when vexations and annoyances threaten to move us from our equanimity or steadfastness.

Christian patience is a sweet resignation to the revealed will of God, even amid adverse circumstances. To put it another way, it means a plodding fidelity in spite of the pressure of discouragement. It is quietly bearing, with submissive will, the pain or sorrow that comes upon us. Christian patience enables one to see the hand and heart of God in every circumstance and know that He is working out that which will bring blessing to us and glory to Himself. "Let us run with patience the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1). Patience is one of the most rare virtues, because it is so difficult to cultivate. The only person who was completely patient under all circumstances was the Christ Who did all things well.

V. Godliness. Furnish your person with godliness.

There is a godliness, or reverence toward God, of which a man may be conscious, when all is serene in his life, but which disappears in the face of temptation or trial. How often have you been in a calm and godly frame of mind for a while? Why not longer? Simply because the first annoyance drove it all away. That is not the right kind of godliness. It is not snatches of godliness, but abiding godliness that is expected, even amid the frettings that come into our lives. Only in the presence of God is godliness to be found. Godliness expresses itself inwardly by habitual communion with Him in spirit, and outwardly by habitual service of Him in act. Is your inward life one of real communion with God your Father? Is your outward life one of unbroken and glad service to Him?

Paul wrote: "For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come" (I Timothy 4:8). If this quality abounds in our lives, it will cause others to think of God, and is not this the chief business of life? If we are controlled by the carnal nature and sin rules the heart, we give the enemies of the Lord opportunity to blaspheme the very name of God. Godliness is that state of heart and life which is in keeping with the character of God. The ungodliness of many a professing Christian has done irreparable damage to the souls of men.

VI. Brotherliness. Furnish the brethren with brotherliness.

"And in godliness brotherly kindness." The admonition is for a tender affection to all our fellow Christians who are the children of the same Father, members of the same family, servants of the same Master, travelers to the same country, and heirs of the same inheritance. The New Testament does not leave any doubt as to the importance, the value, and the necessity of each Christian having a genuine concern for every other Christian. That religion does not go far enough that satisfies itself in acts of devotion only. If the heart does not go out to others in interest and in love, it will lack the substance which will stand the test of trial. Out of godliness will flow the love of the brethren. God's Word says: "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" Do you furnish your brethren with love?

VII. Charity. Furnish all with love.

"And in brotherly kindness charity." Love is the crown jewel of the complete graces of the Christian character. The kind of love which is meant here is that which flows down upon the sinful, the unworthy, and the undeserving. This love is the crowning grace of Christian development. It is the final summit of Christian growth. It is the most important thing. A house without a roof is of no value and when this love is missing all that precedes it is of little value. Something is dead wrong with the Christian building which does not have over it the roof of love.

Our text teaches us that if we will unfold our Christian faith into virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness and love, we shall never be useless, fruitless, or come to grief. As we unfold our faith, let us furnish our faith with quality, our minds with truth, our bodies with mastery, our spirit with patience, our persons with godliness, our brethren with brotherliness, and all men with love.