THE WHY, WHAT AND HOW OF CHRISTIAN GROWTH

Posted on February 3, 2020 by Eddie

Category: Observations

This is the script from the sermon that I preached at Emmanuel Church in Keighley, yesterday. It's longer than most of my blog posts - sorry about that. It also has a number of typos and things carried over from the script, apologies if that bothers you.

2 Peter 1:5-9

INTRODUCTION

It goes without saying that you have to read passages from the Bible in context. Peter didnâ€™t sit down and write this short passage as a stand-alone piece; he wrote a letter and weâ€™ve extracted a bit from that letter to focus on â€“ but it only makes full sense as a part of a bigger whole.

This letter is Peterâ€™s farewell to churches in Turkey that he had been involved with over a number of years. The letter has two main points, he encourages Christians to keep growing and he deals with the threat of false teaching in the church. However, it is important to note that he does these two things within a very particular framework; the return of Christ. There are lots of different ways that we can approach Christian growth and false teaching, but Peter has chosen what we can call an eschatological framework. Weâ€™ll come back to that in a few minutes.

The particular passage we are looking at is part of Peterâ€™s teaching to encourage Christians to keep growing and Iâ€™d like to explore it from three simple questions; why?, what? and how.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

WHY?

This passage is encouraging Christians to develop in areas such as goodness, self-control and so on.

These are internal qualities which will be worked out in concrete actions. Now, the place of â€œgood worksâ€ in the Christian life is sometimes a little confused. The Christian life is often presented as God saving us from earth so that we can go to heaven. Then we are left with this awkward interlude on planet earth, where we should live a good life, but itâ€™s not particularly significant in the long run of things. Can I gently suggest, that this isnâ€™t actually what the Bible teaches us?

In verse four, we have a little phrase which is of massive significance.

So that through then you may participate in the divine nature.

We as Christians are called to participate in Godâ€™s nature. This is much bigger than being saved and going to heaven. To be honest, itâ€™s completely outrageous, but take a look at John 17:20-21

20 â€œMy prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Jesus praying to his Father, says that he is in the Father and that the Father is in him â€“ talking about the unity of the Trinity that we were thinking about a few weeks back. And then he adds, â€œmay they also be in usâ€ . Jesus prays that in some way, we would share in the life of the Trinity. This is massive. Letâ€™s be clear about something, this does not mean that we are destined to become God. Nothing in the Bible suggests this; but in some way, we will share Godâ€™s nature. Eternal life, is an enabler of this transformation, itâ€™s not the end point in and of itself. Just look at this apparently odd quote from chapter three verse 11.

11Â Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly livesÂ *12Â* ***as you look forwardÂ to the day of God and speed its coming.Â That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.Â*** *13Â* ***But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth,Â where righteousness dwells.***

14 ***So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.***

You might think that because the world is going to be destroyed, it doesnâ€™t really matter how we

act, but our destiny is beyond this world and what we do here is a time when we are able to shape our thoughts and attitudes so that we can start to act like God and share in his nature (albeit, very imperfectly).

Let me quickly insist that this does not mean that our good works and our character can save us â€“ they canâ€™t. But good works and a godly character â€“ participating in Godâ€™s nature is what we are saved for.

So why does Peter say that we need to add together all these virtues? Because that was the whole point of our salvation in the first place.

WHAT?

Peter now goes on to list seven qualities that he wants Christians to work on. Iâ€™m not going to spend a lot of time developing these qualities; each one could form the basis of a sermon on its own and Iâ€™d like to try and focus on the big picture.

Faith â€“ this is the starting point and Peter simply assumes that all Christians have it â€“ see 1:1

- **Goodness**: this word means virtue, or courage. Itâ€™s the same word that is used of land that is fertile and productive. We are to be good people, living fruitful lives.
- **Knowledge**: this goes beyond knowing facts. It includes the ability to reject the teachings of the false teachers that Peter will be mentioning, but it also means knowing how to act appropriately.
- **Self-Control**: this includes being able to handle our temper and reject temptation, but it also includes being submissive to Godâ€™s Spirit â€“ see Galatians 5.
- **Perseverance**: the tenacity to carry on. Life on earth can be tough and we have to stick with Christ even when weâ€™d rather not.
- **Godliness**: this term is rarely used in the NT as it normally refers to pagan gods. Here, Peter is using it as a catch-all term. You should do the stuff God does â€“ show mercy, love etc.
- **Mutual Affection**: Care, support and solidarity within the church. This should be the mark of any Christian community.
- **Love**: this is a summary term, drawing it all together. We should love as God did â€“ a sacrificial, self-giving love.

If you want to dig more into the individual items of this list, any good Bible dictionary or commentary will be a help. For now, Iâ€™d just like to point out that what Peter is telling us to do is to act in a God-like fashion â€“ to participate in the nature of God.

With that in mind, Iâ€™d like to make three brief comments on the list.

1. Itâ€™s not a tick list. The idea isnâ€™t that you get goodness sorted and then move on to knowledge. If that were the case, none of us would ever get beyond the first point. We are to work on all of these all the time â€“ though undoubtedly, there will be times when God highlights on or another to you.
2. Note that Peter doesnâ€™t expect us to be perfect. In verse 8 he tells us to **possess these qualities in increasing measure**. In other words, we have to keep improving. This means that we can never rest on our laurels. There wonâ€™t be a time this side of eternity when we can say weâ€™ve got it right. Some of us are naturally more self-controlled than others â€“ itâ€™s just a matter of character. But theyâ€™ve still got to keep improving!
3. The third thing to note is that these commands are all plural. Itâ€™s not about each of us going off on our own and working on these things. These qualities are worked out in community. We have to add to our knowledge and self-control, we have to be more loving â€“ we do this together. Yes, there is always an individual aspect to these things, but we are very much missing the point if we see these as individual commands. Growing together in this way is part of sharing in the divine nature.

HOW?

OK, this is where the rubber meets the road and to be honest, itâ€™s the hard bit. If any of you have got this sorted, can you please tell me because Iâ€™ve got a long way to go.

Fortunately, the passage does provide us with some guidance.

1:3 His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

We shouldnâ€™t despair of our lack of growth, because God has given us everything we need to grow. The indwelling Holy Spirit is able to break down the barriers in our individual and corporate lives to help us to grow. This happens through our knowledge of him â€“ the more you know God

(know him, not know about him) the more your character can be shaped into his likeness. This is why studying the Bible and prayer are important â€“ they provide the groundwork that allows our lives to be shaped.

However, the fact that God has given us everything we need doesnâ€™t mean that we can sit back and just wait for Godly character to develop.

1:5 For this very reason, make every effort to addâ€¦

We have to be active in this process. God has given us what we need, but that doesnâ€™t mean that we donâ€™t have to do something. The thing is, we canâ€™t do it on our own. As we struggle to become more godly or more loving we have to consciously rely on Godâ€™s help to get there.

Make no mistake, this stuff is tough. When he is talking about developing Christian character, Paul uses metaphors such as training as an athlete, or the discipline needed in the army. Just think of the sight of an athlete who has pushed themselves to the point where they are almost throwing up through exhaustion, or one of those paras that you see in documentaries struggling with effort as their drill sergeant pushes them. This is the sort of effort that the Bible tells us to put into developing Christian character â€“ but effort itself is never enough. We need to do the tough stuff in dependence on the Holy Spirit. It might sound nonsensical, but that is how the Bible pictures us growing. God has given us everything we need, but we still have to make every effort.

However, there is another resource that is available to us. I pointed out that these commands are plural, addressed to the congregation as a whole and this is key in putting these things into practice. As Christians we are to encourage and (when needed) admonish each other to help us to grow into the people that God wants us to be.

However, for this to work, two things need to happen.

- Firstly, we have to be prepared to talk about spiritual things with one another. I canâ€™t encourage you about the way that you have grown in goodness if all we ever talk about is the football results. A lot â€“ perhaps most â€“ Christian conversation is superficial and does nothing to help us to grow. Of course, there is a place for normal everyday conversation about the weather and how the kids are doing â€“ we canâ€™t build relationships and friendships if we donâ€™t talk about that stuff â€“ but we canâ€™t stop there.
- Secondly, we have to be prepared to shelve our British reserve about personal discussions. It is

part of our culture to shrug off any compliments, which means that it is almost impossible to encourage someone who refuses to accept theyâ€™ve done something well. Equally, we avoid anything that looks like conflict like the plague, which means that we are prepared to tolerate behaviour and attitudes that we shouldnâ€™t. Our fellow Christians are one of the most important resources that God has given to help us to grow -but our culture predisposes us to reject that resource. If we are going to be the people God wants us to be, we will have to be prepared to be uncomfortable.

So, what does making every effort look like in practice? Many of us are looking for a silver-bullet, a big gesture that will help us to sort out the Christian life in one go. There is a great market for books like that. In truth, what we are really talking about is thousands of little decisions that help to shape our character. Stepping back from a futile argument rather than letting things spiral out of control. Admitting that you were wrong and asking forgiveness rather than continuing to defend your behaviour. It might seem silly to you, but something that I find really helpful is slowing down and letting cars out on a busy road. You see, I can be a very aggressive driver, which is not good for all sorts of reasons, but by deliberately calming myself and allowing someone in in front of me, I can release some of the tension inside. Sue will point out that I still have a long way to go â€“ but the sort of growth that Peter is talking about here comes though lots of small steps that gradually shape our character into one that God desires.

One last thought.

For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

Our knowledge of Jesus should be productive and effective and if we arenâ€™t being shaped into the divine nature, itâ€™s as though weâ€™ve not been saved in the first place. One key to developing the sort of character that weâ€™ve been talking about is continually returning back to base and considering what it is that Jesus has done for us. Paul sums this up brilliantly in Philippians 2 and Iâ€™ll close with this.

3 ***Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,*** *4* ***not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.***

5 ***In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:***

6Â ***Who, being in very natureÂ God,***
Â Â Â Â did not consider equality with GodÂ something to be used to his own advantage;
7Â rather, he made himself nothing
Â Â Â Â by taking the very natureÂ of a servant,
Â Â Â Â being made in human likeness.
8Â ***And being found in appearance as a man,***
Â Â Â Â he humbled himself
Â Â Â Â by becoming obedient to deathâ€"
Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â even death on a cross!

9 ***Therefore God exalted him to the highest place***
and gave him the name that is above every name,
10 ***that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,***
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 ***and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,***
to the glory of God the Father.