

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Step One: To Faith Virtue

And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. (2 Peter 1:5–9, KJV 1900)

Our primary exposure to the word "Virtue" might be from an old poem; we seldom read or hear it in today's common language. Regrettable; it is sorely needed as a personal trait in today's morally meandering, aimless culture. During my secular career that covered portions of five decades, I observed a distinct drift on this downward trek away from moral integrity in business to "If you can keep it hidden and get away with it, who cares?" For a Christian living five or six days a week in this amoral culture, a Biblical message on Christian ethics on Sunday morning might well seem archaic and out of step with "The real world." To borrow a favorite cliché from Dr. Phil, "How is that working for you?" How is it working for our culture at large? And the answer, the honest answer, is that it isn't working at all. It is dragging our culture deeper and deeper into a dysfunctional maze of fruitless confusion.

The Greek word translated "Virtue" in this passage is translated as follows:

...the quality of moral excellence—'outstanding goodness, virtue.' ...'if there is any moral excellence and if there is (reason for) praise' Php 4:8¹

The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines the English word similarly.

Conformity of life and conduct with moral principles; voluntary adherence to recognized laws or standards of right conduct; moral excellence; uprightness.

I occasionally like to provide word meanings in both languages to reinforce to Bible readers that their Bible is reliable and altogether up-to-date in its form and its content. Unique, yes indeed, but wholly

applicable to the believer today no less than it was to the people who read it in the first century.

One of my earliest memories from going to church with my parents exemplifies the low—and wrong—view of this principle, even among ministers. I recall my parents' pastor preaching on a text that commanded high moral conduct of every believer. As the man interacted with the passage, you could almost see him turning inward. It seemed that he increasingly realized that he fell short of this behavior. Instead of confessing and committing to a greater effort, the man paused briefly and then blurted out, "Don't do like I do. Do what I say." Even in my young inattentive mind, this idea didn't seem at all right. Something about it was simply wrong. And I was right. I appreciate the difficulty of confronting a passage that commands more than I may be delivering, but the Biblical response is confession and a prayerful commitment to striving to grow into the behavior, not dismissing it and investing no effort to obedience.

I have occasionally—rarely, thankfully—heard preachers and deacons, or their wives acknowledge the clear New Testament qualifications for these two offices. Similar to the preacher in my youth, they openly acknowledge that they do not comply, and, further, that they have no intention of complying with those Scriptural requirements. Occasionally they will voice their private opinion that no one in today's world lives up to those qualifications, so their failure is no less acceptable than others who also fail. Do you see the departure from Scripture into amoral relativism in this attitude? Scripture leaves no doubt, none whatever. When Scripture and culture collide, the faithful believer is to stand on the side of Scripture, not compromise his/her faith and contradict or openly ignore Scripture. I would not knowingly lay ordination hands on a man, preacher or deacon, who holds to this low view of the Biblical qualifications for his office. It lacks the core quality of virtue that Peter sets as the foundation for the fruitful faith.

When you read a list of qualities in Scripture, pay special attention to the order of those qualities in the list. The Holy Spirit never throws out

¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., 743 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996).

principles or behaviors in these lists in a casual order. He revealed them in the order that you see with a good reason. To complete the list and to gain the outcome that the passage commands, we must transform our lives according to this orderly sequence. In the case of our present seven-step list, after faith, virtue is the bedrock principle upon which the remaining six behaviors stand—or fall.

Many believers in today's compromised Christianity think that they may leap over all six of Peter's building blocks and strive to grow charity, love at work (1 Corinthians 13:4-7; notice that every point is a verb; it describes a behavior, not merely an attitude or feeling. Biblical love, "Charity," is just that, a lifestyle, not a set of emotions). They no doubt have good intentions, but their efforts shall predictably fail, for they seek to build the most demanding behavior without its required underpinning support structure. If you commit to Biblical charity as your goal, you must honestly and faithfully work your way through the six building blocks that Peter lists, all of which he commands us to add to our faith. At about this point, many sincere, but perhaps superficial believers will think, "Christianity is not for sissies, is it?" And they are right. With good reason, the New Testament repeatedly builds an analogy between the faithful, godly life and maturity.

Jesus routinely confronted and enraged many of the most "Religious" elite of Judah's leaders in His ministry and teachings. On one occasion, He told his hearers to follow the teachings of those men, but not to follow their bad example. (Matthew 23:3, alarmingly similar to the attitude in deacons and preachers that I mention above)

Let's examine the core principle of virtue; "...voluntary adherence to recognized laws or standards of right conduct." First, this compliance cannot be coerced or forced. It is "voluntary." In the most basic description in the New Testament of discipleship, Jesus emphasized a willing attitude toward denying self and taking up one's cross. (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23) True discipleship must begin in the mind and heart. A rebellious heart never produces obedient feet.

The second basis for virtue is "...adherence to recognized laws or standards of right conduct." Where do you look for those "recognized" laws or standards? I recently had a fascinating dialogue with a niece regarding the death penalty. She was watching a highly publicized murder trial. She became convinced that the accused person was guilty. Although she could not bring herself to embrace the idea of the death penalty, though popular opinion of this penalty today all but guarantees that the convicted criminal shall not be killed for the crime, the trial stirred my niece to ponder the question. Lawyers in these trials are more confused than insightful in their presentations to the jury. The prosecutor, if he mentions the Biblical principle, will cite an Old Testament passage that required death for crimes similar to

the crime in the trial. Totally ignoring the obvious Biblical principle, the defense attorney will emphasize the sixth Commandment. (Exodus 20:13) How do we reconcile the prohibition against murder and the death penalty? Simple. The Ten Commandments are directed to personal behavior. The death penalty for sin in Scripture addresses the responsibility of civil government. There is no Biblical contradiction whatever.

During our dialogue, I made this point to my niece and suggested that God always takes the moral principle of righteous conduct away from us and from our experiential and/or emotional foundations and anchors them in His revelation in Scripture.

Whether we are dealing with questions such as the death penalty for especially heinous crimes or with a practical decision that will impact what we do today in our private life, Scripture establishes the basis for "...standards of right conduct" for every believer. God never gives the setting of that standard to us. He always reserves it to Himself alone. Ours is to obey, not try to renegotiate His law with Him.

In today's world, as a pastor and minister, I often hear people complain that the problem that they face is simply too complex for them to figure out and resolve with a Biblical principle. Wrong, oh, so wrong. The more we immerse our minds in Scripture the clearer our moral choices become. We complicate our lives by trying to mix Scripture's teachings with the cultural ideas of the moment. The very effort itself starts with hopeless confusion, so nothing moral or good can possibly grow out of such a state of mind. As we dig deeper into Biblical teachings and seek them to guide our lives, the complexity vanishes, and God's way becomes clear and reasonable. In Romans 12:2, Paul's use of "reasonable" to describe our faith-walk means "Rational." It is logical and rational, altogether "Reasonable" for a believer to live according to Scripture, not mix Scripture with his/her emotions and the norms of a fallen, broken culture. The least "Rational" attitude imaginable is the attempt to blend the warped views of any human culture at any time with the teachings of Scripture.

On the sound principle that the Holy Spirit directed Peter to list these behaviors in a logical sequence, He requires us to start with the right belief that virtue, personal, godly, moral integrity is the bedrock foundation for everything that follows. Start with the faith that God gave you. The first and most essential step for our beginning, for what Peter directs us to add, must be virtue. We accept God's revealed moral teachings and add them to our faith—to the way we live. Christian "Virtue" should be so dominant in our lives that it permeates our reputation in our family, our neighborhood, our employment, our church—every aspect of our lives. Failure in this step dooms any attempt at building the fruitful life of faith that Peter commands.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor