

Virtue and Knowledge

M. W. Bassford

11-2-08

Introduction.

- A. Just as we continue to focus narrowly on our various service groups, so too we continue on Sunday nights to take a more broad-based look at what kind of people God wants us to be, as revealed in 2 Peter 1:5-8. During our last sermon in this series, we looked at faith. Most people, particularly on the Protestant side of the community of believers, acknowledge the importance of faith. In fact, many over-emphasize it. There are a lot of folks in the religious world today who, if they'd been writing 2 Peter, would have stopped with faith.
- B. Peter, of course, encourages us to do much more than merely believe. Faith is great. Indeed, faith is necessary. However, if we just sit around and claim to have faith, that isn't going to do either us or God a whole lot of good. That's why Peter points out the next two rungs on the ladder: virtue and knowledge. Neither one of these ideas is terribly in vogue in today's world. "Virtue" is the kind of word that seems to most Americans to belong to the nineteenth century. You don't normally hear people talking about how important it is to be virtuous. Part of the problem is that virtue often requires us to do something we don't want to.
- C. Likewise, knowledge, particularly in a Scriptural sense, is something that the world around us doesn't esteem. At least as I understand things, 50 years ago, when you talked to somebody about the Bible, there was at a decent chance they knew Genesis from Revelation. Today, that's not often true, even among the so-called "religious" of our day. Nonetheless, God places a great emphasis on spiritual knowledge.
- D. We need to be both more aware of these things and more committed to them than the many around us who have their feet set on the broad path. Let's look this evening, then, at virtue and knowledge.

I. Virtue.

- A. As we typically do, in our exploration of virtue, we need to begin by **DEFINING IT**. Somewhat surprisingly, Scriptural definition of the term is scarce. The Greek word that the NKJV translates as "virtue" is *arête*, which you FC graduates might remember as one of the names of the societies on campus there. This word, though, only shows up five times in Scripture, and two of those are in 2 Peter 1:5, which we just read. Of the rest, probably the most enlightening use of the term appears in 1 Peter 2:9. What the NKJV has as "praises" is actually also *arête*. So . . . what can we take from this? It tells us that virtue is something we can perceive in God because of the way He called us from darkness into light. In other words, virtue is that quality of God that makes Him a good God. In the same way, friends, we are virtuous people when we engage in behavior that those around us instinctively recognize as good. If we possess virtue, we are good neighbors, good students, and good employees. It gives us the reputation of being stand-up, decent people.
- B. The Scripture tells us how we can develop this reputation in Philippians 4:8. It's not something we gain by accident. Instead, just like all the other attributes this verse lists, it's the result of determination and meditation. Meditation is a word that's kind of been taken over by the New Agers around us, but it's an important activity for Christians to engage in too. There's nothing mystical about it; it's simply the process of turning some spiritual idea over and over in our minds until we've really got a handle on it, until we know what it is and what we need to do about it. When we meditate on virtue, then, we go through the process of deciding beforehand to be good, decent people. This is important, and it's important because many of the opportunities we see to be virtuous require us to have already made the decision. For instance, let's say we're going into the grocery store, and a lady comes out carrying two bags full of cans. One of the bags bursts, and cans go rolling across the parking lot. If we haven't meditated on being virtuous, here's what happens. We start asking ourselves, "Should I help?" as we go walking into the store, and by the time we make our decision, the lady's either picked up all the cans already, or they've been mashed flat by passing cars. Virtue in action, on the other hand, has to be pretty well instinctive. We have to train ourselves so that the natural thing to do is to kneel down in the parking lot and start picking up cans. That's what virtue requires.
- C. Of course, it's important to be virtuous, but **THE PROBLEM WITH VIRTUE** is that virtue by itself isn't enough, just like faith by itself isn't enough. Hopefully all the Christians we know are good, decent people, but all of us also know plenty of good, decent people who aren't Christians. Paul highlights the problem that people like that have in Romans 10:1-2. During his time as a Jew, I'm sure that Paul also saw lots of good, decent, virtuous Jews. They continued to be good and virtuous even as they rejected Christ and His gospel. They were even religious, but it wasn't the right kind of religion. That's why virtue needs to be completed with knowledge. If we are nothing more than virtuous, we have a good reputation with the people around us, but we remain ignorant of what we have to do to please God. If we continue in that state, we will probably be quite surprised to learn on the day of judgment that our virtue wasn't enough. We don't just need virtue. The people around us don't just need virtue, although it's a good start. Instead, they need knowledge of Christ, the knowledge that won't just teach them to be decent, but will save their souls as well.

II. Knowledge.

- A. As we consider this topic, we need to begin by considering **THE DIFFUSION OF KNOWLEDGE**: what it is, how it gets to us, and how far it is supposed to go. There are many kinds of knowledge in the world, some good, some clearly evil. We see how the Bible uses the term, though in Ephesians 3:4-5. This is a complex passage, and we need to break it down. Notice that this all begins with a spiritual subject which Paul calls "the mystery of Christ." This refers to God's plan of salvation, which was very carefully concealed until it was brought to fruition. Once that occurred, the Holy Spirit began to reveal portions of that mystery to God's chosen messengers, the apostles and prophets. Paul was one of those messengers, and he recorded his inspired knowledge of the mystery in, among other places, the letter to the Ephesians. When the Ephesians received this letter, they could understand the particular insight that was given to Paul, which, as Paul says a couple of verses down, is that the Gentiles could be sharers in Christ just as much as Jews could.
- B. Today, we receive our spiritual knowledge in just the same way as the Ephesians did. We don't make it up or derive it from our own experiences; instead, we turn to what has been written. We also recognize that the written record of Scripture is not the product of human wisdom either; instead, we understand that it records the inspired message of the Holy Spirit. Finally, we see that we don't have to turn to some pastor or priest or professor of religion to interpret the Bible for us. Instead, as we read, we can understand that knowledge.
- C. Once we have taken the spiritual knowledge of the Bible and internalized it, we become bearers of that knowledge, and wherever we go, it should go too. This is the process that Paul discusses in 2 Corinthians 2:14. Through our knowledge, we are to be a fragrance of Christ. That reminds me, actually, of one of the sad things about working at the church building. As you may have noticed, the area to the north and the west of the church building is basically filled with restaurants, and whenever the wind is right, the smell of cooking food from Wendy's or McDonald's or Bob Evans just comes wafting over the parking lot. That makes me very sad, because even though I know I'm not going to stop and eat at McDonald's, I very much want to. In the same way, friends, being around our knowledge of Christ should make the people around us want to become Christians. This knowledge should be evident in our lives, of course, but that's not all. It should be apparent in our words as well. People who talk to us very much should know that we have an insight into the spiritual world that they don't, an insight that leads us to happiness in this life and in the life to come.
- D. We learn how far God wants this knowledge to progress in 1 Timothy 2:3-4. He wants everybody to come to a knowledge of the truth and be saved, and if we're the only ones who have the knowledge, guess where that leaves us? We can't be greedy or fearful and keep what we know from others. We need to be generous and share it, because if knowledge of the truth makes it possible for men to be saved, men who do not know the truth cannot be saved. If we give them the opportunity to hear the truth and they reject it, that's their problem, but if they would have listened, but we didn't tell them, that's very much our problem.
- E. In addition to linking it to salvation, the Bible has other important things to say about **THE RESULTS OF KNOWLEDGE**. Knowledge of the truth of God's word doesn't just save us from our sins; it also instructs us in everything we need to do as Christians. This is the point of Paul's words in Colossians 1:9-10. As is true in the early parts of many of Paul's letters, this records a prayer that Paul is praying for the Colossians. At the top of his prayer list for them is knowledge, because if they have knowledge and understanding, a number of good things will happen. They will walk worthy of the Lord, they will please Him fully, they will be fruitful in every good work, and they will increase still more in knowledge. Friends, those are some really, really important things to do, and we need to do them just as much as the Colossians did. However, the path to all of them leads through knowledge. This tells us, then, that one of the major preoccupations of our existence needs to be seeking out and devouring more of this kind of spiritual understanding. In any congregation, it's really easy to tell the ones who are feeding themselves more and more on the word, and it's easy to tell because they're growing. They're having an easier time in their spiritual battles, and they're daily becoming more and more useful to the Lord's work. All that comes from knowledge. On the other hand, if we aren't growing the way we should, if it seems like we're losing ground to Satan, if we just can't find the resources to get to work in the kingdom, all of those things most likely point to a knowledge deficit. If that's our problem, friends, the solution is easy, if not simple. We need to get a knowledge surplus instead. We need to assemble with the saints more. We need to study on our own more. The more knowledge we have, the more good things will happen.
- F. Of course, Satan sees opportunity in our knowledge, just like he does in everything else. One of the downsides of knowledge is chronicled in 1 Corinthians 8:1. If we start acquiring a lot of knowledge, it's easy to become arrogant. This can become apparent in any number of areas. We can start looking down our noses at the non-Christians around us. We can so poison our teaching with self-righteousness that to our hearers, we transform the fragrance of Christ into what we smell downwind of a Dumpster. Likewise, we can be so high-handed in our dealings with brethren who know less than we do that we repel them from the Lord instead of attracting them to Him. In both cases, the solution is an attitude of humility and love. In the words of a brother I know down in Texas, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." We need to make sure that others see our love first, because that makes our knowledge easier to digest.

Conclusion. However, this entire spiritual transformation is impossible unless you are a Christian.