

FORWARD

Week Four | January 28, 2018 | Moving Forward in Our Character, Part 2

PREPARATION

GETTING READY:

Before your group meets next time, spend some time alone in God's Word reading through 2 Peter 1:5–10. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truths of this text and how it applies to your life.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Believers must actively pursue Christlike virtues so they will be effective, fruitful, and steadfast in their spiritual journey.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

When we make every effort to move our character forward, we communicate the right things to both our church and the world, and we are stable in our faith. When we do not make this effort, our calling becomes questionable and we end up stumbling in our faith.

MEDITATE

“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.” (2 Peter 1:5–7)

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

Q: *Who does the work of a child learning to walk, the child or the parent?*

Q: *Do you think babies/children play a part in their own development?
Why or why not?*

From the time a baby is born all the way into adulthood, the child is moving forward in his or her development. While kids can do things on their own by the time they are grown, when they were children their parents did most of the heavy lifting for them, whether that was feeding, or getting them from place A to place B. Infants can do nothing by themselves. They totally trust a mother or father to meet their needs.

However, around age one, babies start playing a more pronounced part in their own development. Instead of mom or dad carrying them around, for example, children want to try walking on their own. When we watch a parent hold the little hands of a child, standing them up, and walking with them step by step, we see the child take some steps. The question becomes, then, who is responsible for the child moving across the floor? Is it the child or the parent?

The truth is, it's both! The child wouldn't make it without the parents' guidance and assistance, but truly walking does require the child to move his legs. Effort on the part of the little one is required to get across the floor if they ever hope to walk. He can't simply sit back and let mom or dad dangle him across the floor forever. At some point, he has to put his own feet down, step by step, and actively pursue the skill of walking with his parent's help.

In this lesson, we will see that the same is true for our character development. While God certainly is the One providing the growth and guiding the process, our involvement is necessary as well. We cannot hope to grow or develop if we do not put forth our own effort, putting one foot in front of the other as we walk the path of becoming more like Jesus.

Q: *Share about a time hard work was required for you to grow in a certain area of your spiritual life.*

Q: *What kind of work goes in to developing your own character? Be specific.*

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Last week, we found that God moves our character forward in all types of circumstances, whether good, bad, or somewhere in between. While God is certainly the One who empowers our character development, this week's lesson will show us that the process also includes our involvement. We don't sit on the sidelines, hoping God will strike us from heaven with good character. Instead, 2 Peter shows us that we must work in tandem with Him, making every effort to grow and playing our part in the cultivation of our character.

In the time of this letter, there were various false teachers afflicting the church. The primary indicator that they were not genuine believers was that their lifestyle and character did not line up with Christ's. To help genuine believers distinguish themselves from the false teachers, Peter gives clear instructions to work hard on godliness as a means to separate from the false teachers and cultivate good character, which gave evidence to their conversion. As we study this week's Scripture passage, we will see that pursuing good character:

- 1. REQUIRES OUR HARD EFFORT**
- 2. MAKES US FRUITFUL AND EFFECTIVE**
- 3. CONFIRMS OUR CALLING AND KEEPS US FROM STUMBLING**

GOING DEEPER

+ *This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's biblical truth.*

PURSUING GOOD CHARACTER REQUIRES OUR HARD EFFORT

■ 2 PETER 1:5-7

- Q:** *Why do you think Christians sometimes shy away from the concept of hard work or diligent effort when it comes to our relationship to God?*
- Q:** *What other areas of your life require hard work in order to obtain good results? Why should the area of our character be any different?*

For many Christians, the idea of “good works” or “hard effort” grates against the gospel truth of salvation by grace alone. It’s true that we are saved by God’s gracious substitution of Christ’s good works in our place. Rather than judging us on our own efforts or righteousness, the Lord bases our standing with Him on *Christ’s* efforts and righteousness. However, salvation by grace alone is not at odds with a virtuous and excellent work ethic. As Dallas Willard says,

“The path of spiritual growth in the riches of Christ is not a passive one. Grace is not opposed to effort. It is opposed to earning. Effort is action. Earning is attitude. You have never seen people more active than those who have been set on fire by the grace of God. Paul, who perhaps understood grace better than any other mere human being, looked back at what had happened to him and said: ‘By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.’ (1 Corinthians 15:10)”

—*Christian Herald (U.K.)*, 14 April 2001.

Indeed, those saved by grace should offer the highest level of effort in all that they do, showing the world what true gratitude looks like. Because we’ve been given so gracious a gift in our salvation, we respond in joyful obedience to the One who saved us, making every effort to look like Him. In this way, God is not the only one involved in our character development. We have a part to play too, working in obedient cooperation with His power.

In numerous places, the Scriptures teach us to put forward considerable effort toward many things. For example, we are taught to work hard at everything we do. And when we obey, the Bible praises our diligence as a good thing (Proverbs 10:4–5, 28:19–20; Romans 12:11–12; Colossians 3:23–24). Furthermore, we are told to “make every effort” to maintain unity in the church (Ephesians 4:3), enter into Sabbath rest of God (Hebrews 4:11), and live in peace with others (Hebrews 12:14).

Another place we are told to “make every effort” is in 2 Peter 1:5. While other effort-oriented passages teach us to be diligent in areas like ministry or money, this passage teaches us that we should apply significant effort toward our own *character development*. We don’t sit around while God transforms our character to look like Christ over time. We have a part to play in His work. Indeed, the Bible tells us that we can work *against* the Spirit’s movement in our lives (1 Thessalonians 5:19; Ephesians 4:30), and Peter is showing us an alternative to this by instructing us to actively pursue honorable qualities. As we do this, we work *with* the Spirit’s transformative power in our character.

Q: List the qualities Peter tells us to pursue. How would you define each of them?

Q: Why is “developing personal character” on the bottom of the priority list for many non-Christians? Why should it be at the top for Christians?

As we read through verses 5–7, we see a list of biblical virtues that Peter tells us to diligently pursue. First, he says we must “supplement our faith” with “virtue.” Peter is not saying that our faith must be paired with works in order for us to be saved. He is saying that true faith is *evidenced* by observable godly character lived out in daily life. “Virtue” here is a Greek word that means “excellence,” a phrase used by Greek writers as shorthand for the “sum of all desirable character qualities.” So, Peter starts by saying believers should work hard to evidence their faith by reflecting the moral excellence of Christ in every aspect of life.

Along with moral *excellence*, Peter says we should pursue *knowledge*. We shouldn’t simply seek to build up good actions, but we should also seek to build up our minds as well, always learning more about our good God. Next, as our actions and minds are becoming more like Jesus, we should naturally be moving forward in *self-control*, *patient endurance*, *godliness*, and *brotherly affection*, all *obvious* qualities of Christ.

Peter finishes with another catch-all word, “love,” the Bible’s shorthand for the fruit of the Spirit. Here, he is communicating that his list is not exhaustive, and that any other biblical quality he may have missed is also included in his instructions for Christians as they move their own character forward with God’s help.

With such high expectations, it can be easy to feel defeated. Who in the world does everything on this list perfectly every single day? Instead of wallowing in despair, we must remember that this list is not a legalistic set of rules, but instead describes the traits and pursuits of a person whose heart has been transformed by the gospel. Peter simply asks us to pursue these qualities daily in the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter, the very disciple who denied Christ and failed in his character in so many ways, grounds his instructions to live this new life in the reality that we have the divine power necessary to fuel our efforts. If God can take a denier like Peter and change his character into a steadfast Christlikeness, He can do the same for us when we make every effort to work *with* Him and not against Him.

Q: Which of these character traits seems unattainable to you? Why?

Q: What holds you back from “making every effort” to develop your character in the areas where it’s weak?

PURSUING GOOD CHARACTER MAKES US FRUITFUL AND EFFECTIVE

❑ 2 PETER 1:8-9

❑: *Think of a believer who was running well but had a difficult season of backsliding. What usually happened in the person's thinking that led to this season of disobedience?*

❑: *When a Christian leader is exposed as a moral hypocrite or has a major failure in character, what happens to that person's effectiveness in ministry? Why?*

After telling us various qualities to develop in our character, Peter says we become effective and fruitful as a result. When we strive to increase good character in various ways, we avoid being ineffective or unfruitful in God's kingdom work. This makes sense if we think of it in relation to the apple tree illustration from last week. If an apple tree is not growing as it should from season to season, it becomes ineffective at its ultimate purpose, producing apples! We have an ultimate purpose, too—to glorify God in our actions, reflect Him in our character, and minister to others in His name. We become ineffective and unfruitful in these pursuits if we do not make every effort to grow in our Christian character, and eventually, we forget the very gospel that saved us. But when we do actively pursue godly qualities, our spiritual growth is sustained and ever-increasing in its productivity and usefulness.

We should take care to highlight one important phrase in these verses. Peter tells us that a Christian who does not increase his character has “forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins” (v.9). Our greatest adversary in character development is simply forgetting the gospel! People who work diligently on their character remember that godliness comes from being washed clean by God and made new by His Spirit. May we all remember this as we strive to move our character forward.

❑: *Have you ever forgotten the gospel in your pursuit of good character? Why can this sometimes be easy to do?*

❑: *Share about a time that remembering the gospel helped you move forward in your character development.*

PURSUING GOOD CHARACTER CONFIRMS OUR CALLING AND KEEPS US FROM STUMBLING

■ 2 PETER 1:10

- ♀: *Explain how a person's character, whether Christian or not, reveals the god they worship?*
- ♀: *How can you distinguish between a non-Christian and a Christian?*
- ♀: *What's the difference between making a decision yourself and confirming someone else's decision? How does that distinction apply to this verse?*

Peter reveals two final results we can expect if we work hard to move our character forward. The first is *confirmation of our calling*. It's important to note that, when it comes to conversion, believers don't do the electing or calling. God does that part. However, if a person is elected and called into God's family, it's that person's job to *confirm* that calling with their pursuit of excellent character, giving evidence that their conversion is genuine. In other words, if God chose you to come to Christ, your pursuit of godly character and actions should make that calling abundantly clear!

Jesus said something similar in Luke 6:43–45 when He said a tree is known by its fruit. A fig tree is identified by the figs growing from it. Likewise, seeing a grape on a vine confirms that the plant is a grapevine. As we pursue godly qualities, our character and actions will confirm that we are from a certain type of tree, namely, God's family tree. If our character and actions do not line up with God's, this only confirms that we belong to a different tree altogether, the world's. We cannot say we have been chosen by God or that we are His children while having character that is diametrically opposed to His (1 John 1:6, 2:6).

Our character identifies whose calling we have listened to, and ultimately, who our god is. If our character lines up with God's, then God's calling on our lives is confirmed. If our character does not line up with God's, our calling into God's kingdom is questionable. We must all seek to bear godly fruit if we say we are part of His family tree. As we grow in Christlike character, we also grow in confidence that we were truly called and elected into God's kingdom.

Second, Peter says that if we continue to move forward in good character, we will “never fall” in our walk with God. Peter does not mean that we will never make a mistake as long as we live. He means that if we commit ourselves to growing in Christlike character, we won't fall away from the faith. How could a person who is becoming more like

Christ, one who trusts the Father wholeheartedly, ever turn from the faith? Peter says we do not have to fear this fate if we diligently pursue Christian virtues, a precious promise we should take courage in.

- ♀: *How have you seen your own character grow in Christlikeness over the years? How has this given you confidence in your calling?*
- ♀: *What other “callings” do you struggle to tune out as you focus on God’s call on your life?*

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God’s Word to your daily life. Process how what you’ve learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

- ♀: *Recall the barrier that holds you back from developing weak parts of your character. How can you overcome that barrier this week and onward?*
- ♀: *What deficits in your character are keeping you from full effectiveness in your family, ministry, and workplace? Be specific. How can you move forward to overcome these particular deficits?*
- ♀: *What are some creative ways you can remind yourself of the gospel as you strive to move forward in your character?*
- ♀: *Since we are all trying to cultivate character that is more like Christ’s, how can you get more familiar with Jesus’ character? Where can you go to observe His character in daily life?*

PRAY

+ Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.

- God, thank You for giving me a part to play in my character development. Strengthen me to “make every effort” to pursue the Christian virtues found in 2 Peter.
- God, reveal any character deficits I have so that I can strive to become more like Christ in those areas.
- God, remind me daily of the gospel, that I've been cleansed of my sins and that I have Your empowerment to lean on as I seek to grow in my character.
- God, show me specific character traits of Christ through Your Word.

COMMENTARY

2 PETER 1:6 Seeking self-control is not an arbitrary Christian virtue that Peter includes. In other parts of his letter, Peter addresses the issue of false teachers who were characterized by licentious behavior, creature-comfort obsessions, corrupt practices, and sexually impulsive actions. It's clear he wants to ensure that genuine believers are acting in contrast to them.

2 PETER 1:7 In ending with “love,” the supreme Christian virtue, it is likely that Peter is largely referring to love between believers. Since his instructions are given to true believers (in contrast to the false teachers masquerading as Christians), he is probably encouraging family-like devotion among the body of Christ, which is the supreme distinctive of the believing community. While he certainly wouldn't disagree that love should be shown to all people, the context pushes us to elevate a definition of brotherly love among the family of God (over other definitions).

1 PETER 1:9 When Peter says that those who do not practice godly virtues are “nearsighted” or “blind,” he likely means what we would call short-sighted. The false teachers were so *short-sighted*, or focused on immediate pleasures, that they were not able to see the eternal consequences of their actions, namely, that their sinful hearts and behavior would bar them from entrance into God's kingdom. Peter instructs us to prove our genuine conversion by approaching life differently. We should pursue godly behavior for the long haul through God's strength, knowing it will produce fruitfulness, effectiveness, steadfastness, and eventually, entrance into God's eternal kingdom (v. 11).

**All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes and the New American Commentary.*

