

**CHRISTIAN CHARACTER -  
II PETER 1:3-11**

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# CHRISTIAN CHARACTER I

## Introduction

This week, we begin a series of ten lessons on Christian character derived from the teaching of Peter in II Peter 1:3-11. Though Peter's words will provide the framework for our lessons, we obviously will need to go to other passages of Scripture to flesh out our discussions of the character qualities mentioned in this section. Today we will start with an introduction to our study, which will consist of an overview of the Bible's teachings concerning sanctification.

### THE MEANING OF SANCTIFICATION

The Biblical terms "sanctification," "saint," and "holy" all come from the same root. The root meaning that ties these three terms together is that of being "set apart." A "saint" is thus someone who has been set apart by God to be part of His family and to accomplish His work. The different manner of life that characterizes the saint is one designated as "holy," which does not mean "pious" so much as it means "different." Holy living is not something a Christian only does when he is on his knees.

### THE MANIFESTATIONS OF SANCTIFICATION

We should also note that the Bible uses the term "sanctification" in several different ways. The first of these is what theologians sometimes call "positional sanctification," which involves a one-time action performed by God on behalf of those whom He calls into His family. I Corinthians 6:11 uses the word in this sense, when Paul speaks of the Corinthian Christians, whose lives were anything but models of godliness, as already having been sanctified. Paul could legitimately say this because they had already been set apart by God, though their lives reflected the fact only imperfectly at best. Hebrews 10:10 also speaks of holiness in this way, when the author indicates that Christians have already been made holy through the blood of Christ.

The most common use of the term "sanctification" is as a process of change through which the Christian gradually becomes what God has called him to be (sometimes called "practical sanctification"). This process of change is needed, of course, because the Christian, though his sins have been forgiven, continues to sin. This is one of the primary tasks of the indwelling Holy Spirit. New Testament passages that use the term in this sense include John 17:17, I Thessalonians 4:3, II Timothy 2:21-22, Hebrews 12:14, and I Peter 1:15-16.

The final use of the concept of sanctification refers to the end result, "perfect sanctification." This occurs when a believer reaches a state of sinless perfection and is in some sense "like Christ." I Thessalonians 5:23 and Jude 24 both refer to this kind of holiness. While some Christians believe in a doctrine of "perfectionism" which affirms the possibility of sinless perfection in this life (such teachings are usually accompanied by an appallingly narrow definition of sin), the Bible indicates that anyone who thinks he has arrived at such a state deceives himself (I John 1:8). Instead, we need to recognize that the end product of sanctification - sinless perfection - will not be achieved in this life, but will be the eternal condition of all who have been cleansed by the blood of Christ.

[NOTE: The best way to handle this section from a teaching standpoint would be to describe the three uses of the term “sanctification,” then assign your students to look up the verses cited in the above descriptions. When they have looked them up, ask them to identify the aspect of sanctification about which the verses are speaking. You may only be sure that they have understood your explanations when they can accurately match each verse to the appropriate aspect of the Spirit’s sanctifying work.]

## THE MEANS OF SANCTIFICATION

We have already seen that the Holy Spirit is the one who carries out this needed change in the Christian. The next question we must examine is, “How does He go about this task of molding God’s people into what He wants them to be?” The Bible gives us several insights into how the Holy Spirit accomplishes this task. Before giving your students the answer, however, ask them to supply it. You should find that most of the ideas you want to communicate will be brought out by the members of your class if you give them the chance to express themselves on the subject. The following ideas should be brought out in the course of your discussion.

First of all, the Holy Spirit works sanctification in God’s people through what are often called “the means of grace.” These include the Word of God, prayer, and the ordinances of the church. John 17:17 speaks of the Word of God as having sanctifying power. When someone in your class brings this up, ask them to explain *how* the Word does this. They should note that God’s Word sanctifies because it reveals us to ourselves as we really are (James 1:22-25) and shows us what areas of our lives need cleansing (Ephesians 5:26). It also shows us *what* changes we need to make by giving the pattern upon which our lives should be modeled. Prayer cleanses because it increases our awareness of God’s presence and holiness, along with our awareness of our own sin. The ordinances of the church speak of the sacrificial death of Christ, reminding us of our new life in Him, and lead us into continual self-examination.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit sanctifies Christians through their interaction with one another. A significant part of the “edification” that is to take place when Christians meet together involves encouraging one another in holiness (Hebrews 10:24). Christians need to meet together in order to “sharpen” one another (Proverbs 27:17).

The third way in which the Holy Spirit accomplishes sanctification in the life of the Christian is through life’s circumstances. These circumstances are often unpleasant ones (Hebrews 12:10-11; James 1:2-4,12; I Peter 1:6-7). Yet they serve as the refiner’s fire in which the dross of our lives is burned away, revealing more and more the gold that God seeks to polish and beautify.

## THE GOAL OF SANCTIFICATION

Paul tells us in Romans 8:29 that Christians have been predestined by God to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. This is the goal of sanctification. While this state of perfection will not be attained until the believer reaches heaven, the goal is nonetheless one toward which the Christian is to progress.

Thus we arrive at our passage for the course - II Peter 1:3-11. In this section of Peter's final epistle, he encourages the Christians to whom he writes to pursue the goal that God has set before them. He wants them to be like Christ. Yet Peter is not here sadistically setting forth an unattainable goal in order to frustrate his readers. He lets them know that, though the goal may be beyond their reach in this life, they have all the resources they need to pursue that goal to its ultimate conclusion. The blueprint he provides for pursuing the goal of Christlikeness will provide the outline for our study. We will spend a week on each step of the stairway he envisions for his readers. By the time we are finished, we should be able to get a clearer picture of what is needed to avoid "being ineffective and unproductive" in our Christian lives.



## CHRISTIAN CHARACTER II

### Faith

In II Peter 1:5-7, Peter speaks of the development of Christian character in terms of a series of virtues that are to be “added” to one another. How are we to understand this language? Does Peter mean to tell us that these qualities form a progression through which a Christian is to move during the course of his life? Should we seek first to cultivate goodness, then when we have mastered that, move on to knowledge, then concern ourselves with self-control, and so forth? I suspect such an approach is exactly what Peter is telling us *not* to follow. If he were advocating a step-by-step progression, most Christians would be in the sorry state of possessing some virtues but lacking those that follow - the precise condition that Peter is arguing against.

Instead, we need to see this list as consisting of pieces of a puzzle. Certainly it makes sense to see how the pieces relate to one another. At the same time, the order in which the pieces are put together is not really important. What is important, however, is to realize that the complete picture will not be clearly visible until every piece is in place. That is what Christian character should be. The virtues listed by Peter do have a certain relationship to one another, but we can never be satisfied with part of the puzzle. The complete image of Christ in us is formed only as we cultivate all the qualities Peter designates in this passage.

As we progress in our study of the passage, we will look at each characteristic, not just in isolation, but also in relationship to the quality listed before it. This week, however, we begin with the first (and certainly the most basic) piece of the puzzle given by Peter - saving faith.

### FAITH AS THE FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

Faith has often been summarized by theologians as consisting of three components - knowledge, belief, and trust. Certainly it is true that when one comes to Christ, he must know the basic facts about himself and God, he must believe that Christ is the Savior of sinners and has given His life on the cross to pay the penalty for sin, and he must place his complete confidence in the sacrifice of Christ to cover his own offenses against God.

Faith is therefore the starting point for Christian living because, without faith, no one can hope to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Too often, people confuse the Bible’s teachings about Christian character with its teachings about salvation. When Peter gives his instructions in this passage, he is not suggesting that one must (or indeed even *can*) cultivate these qualities on one’s own in order to be acceptable before God. Instead, he makes the point that saving faith is a prerequisite to the cultivation of the qualities he lists. In other words, he assumes that those he addresses already possess saving faith. If they did not, the qualities he goes on to discuss would be beyond their grasp.

Furthermore, we should note that faith is not simply a once-for-all transaction with God. While it is true that a person believes once for all eternity, it is also true that faith is to be an ongoing characteristic of a Christian’s life. The Christian who is saved by faith must also live by faith. What does this imply? For one thing, it means that a person who trusts Christ for his salvation, realizing that he can do nothing on his own to bring it about, must also continue to trust Christ wholly for his sanctification, knowing that it is the Spirit within him who brings about the changes that ultimately

accomplish conformity to the image of Jesus Christ. In the same way that we do not save ourselves, we do not sanctify ourselves. God both saves and sanctifies His people. What this means is that Christians must continue to trust Christ every day to develop in them the character qualities that reveal the nature of Christ to the world.

Consequently, the exhortations given by Peter in this passage must be seen in the context of the centrality of faith. Peter is not speaking like a football coach, exhorting his players to do their best and “win one for the Gipper.” He knows that their very efforts must be exerted within the context of the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter brings out some of these truths more clearly in verses three and four.

## THE BENEFITS OF SAVING FAITH

In verse three, Peter makes it clear that Christians are not left to their own devices when faced with the task of pursuing holiness. According to the apostle, God “has given us everything we need for life and godliness.” Our salvation itself is the source of our life (as Peter said, God “called us by his own glory and goodness”). When we were without Christ, we were dead, but now we are alive in Him. And not only are we alive, but we are also complete in Him. There is nothing that remains to be done in order to secure eternal life for the people of God.

Peter does not stop there, however. He also notes that Christ has given us everything we need for godliness. While we may have to await the eternal state in order to see perfection, Peter assures us that genuine godliness is within our grasp now. We have all the resources we need in order to live a life that is pleasing to God. Ask your class what some of those resources are. Certainly the most important is the Holy Spirit, whose presence guides the believer into the right paths and stimulates him to live a godly life. We should also include the Scriptures, which reveal to us the standards for holiness that God has established and which correspond to the character of God Himself (notice that Peter speaks of “our knowledge of him” as being central to our preparation for life and godliness). Thirdly, we should also include the church. As we saw last week, God placed us into a body so that we could stimulate one another to love and good works. The Christian is thus fully equipped for the task that Peter is about to outline.

What does this imply? Among other things, it suggests that a Christian has no excuses for falling short in the area of godly living. This is not to say that Christians will never sin; obviously this occurs on a regular basis. But the Christian does not have the luxury of giving excuses for his sin. If God has given us everything we need in order to live godly lives, we have no excuse for not doing so. If we take the attitude that there is no excuse for sin, it will keep us from getting lax and sloppy in our Christianity. It is far too easy for Christians to become comfortable with their little sins and make no effort to continue farther on the path that Christ has marked out before us.

On the other hand, Christians should not allow Peter’s assertion that God has given us everything we need to send them into fits of depression when they fail. The response to failure should be repentance and perseverance, not despair and retreat. Peter’s words are intended to encourage us to keep going, not frustrate us into giving up. He is implying that, no matter how many times we fail, the resources of God are still at our disposal to press ahead and pursue the goal of Christlikeness.

## LIVING THE LIFE OF FAITH

Peter goes on in verse four to speak further of the resources that God has provided for His children. He speaks, first of all, of the promises of God. Ask your class what kinds of promises Peter might have had in mind. Their contributions should include promises of forgiveness, the unfailing presence of Christ, help in time of need, eternal security for those who persevere in the faith, and the hope of eternity in the presence of God, among many other possibilities.

How do these promises give us “everything we need”? For one thing, they lead us directly to Christ Himself, who is the source of all good things for the Christian. They also lead us to His Word, which tells us all we need to know in order to serve Him faithfully. They also provide constant encouragement as we experience the successes and failures that accompany life in this sinful world.

Peter then goes on to speak of two consequences of living the life of faith. He says that Christians can “participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.” The first phrase used by Peter here is easy to misunderstand, particularly in an era when Eastern religions and the New Age movement are preaching various brands of pantheism. Peter is not saying here that Christians in any sense “become God.” In fact, he is saying the same thing Paul said in Romans 8:29. “Partaking of the divine nature” is the same thing as being “conformed to the likeness of his Son.” Christians look forward to becoming *like* Christ, not to *becoming* Christ. How do we become like Him? Peter answers that question in the verses that follow, when he describes the character that Christians need to cultivate with the help of the Holy Spirit.

What about this matter of escaping corruption? Obviously, as Christians become more like Christ, they will gradually be weaned from the lusts of the flesh. This is not to say that Christians ever cease to experience temptation. What it means, however, is that, as Christians grow, they should become increasingly capable of resisting that temptation. Ultimate escape from corruption comes only in heaven, but every Christian should experience progress toward that goal as God works sanctification in him.



## CHRISTIAN CHARACTER III

### Goodness

Having established the necessity of saving faith, Peter now starts to put together the puzzle of Christian character. The first piece he adds is the character quality of goodness.

#### THE MEANING OF GOODNESS

The Greek word translated “goodness” in II Peter 1:5 (New International Version; the English Standard Version translates the same word as “virtue”) is not the word normally used in the New Testament to designate goodness. In fact, the word only appears five times in the entire New Testament - twice in this verse. All but one of the occurrences of the word appear in the writings of Peter (Philippians 4:8; I Peter 2:9; II Peter 1:3,5). All occurrences of the word except this one and the one in Philippians ascribe the characteristic to God.

What, then, does today’s character quality mean? It seems to convey the sense of moral fiber, of unshakable strength of character. When applied to God (I Peter 2:9, where it is translated “praises” or “excellencies,” and II Peter 1:3), it speaks of the overwhelming goodness He displayed in saving sinners from destruction and calling them out of darkness and into light. One might even suggest that the character quality of which Peter speaks involves the exercise of moral strength in the face of evil. When Paul uses the word, he tells the Philippians that such moral strength is to be the focus of their attention, rather than the depravity with which they were surrounded in Roman society. Certainly this strength of character is also something needed by Christians today, given the pitiful lack of moral fiber of the society in which we live.

#### AN ILLUSTRATION OF GOODNESS

Ask your students to volunteer examples of biblical figures who displayed strong moral character in the face of evil. They should be able to come up with quite a few examples. Having given them a chance to flesh out the quality of goodness in their own minds, spend some time looking at one particular example - that of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah in Daniel 3. In going over the familiar story of the brave trio, pay particular attention to the enormous pressure under which the three were placed.

What factors would have made it easy for the three young Jews to give in to the required act of idolatry? First of all, they were threatened with loss of their lives (always a strong inducement). Secondly, what they were asked to do was relatively simple, took little time, and could be done inconspicuously. To do the right thing, they had to be willing to stand out in a crowd. Thirdly, they easily could have rationalized bowing before the statue as an act of patriotism rather than one of idolatry (after all, this was why they got in trouble for *not* doing it). In the same way that some of the early Christians rationalized offering incense to the genius of the Roman emperor, the three could have done it here. But they chose instead to stand firm for God in the face of dire threats and universal opposition.

What was the consequence of their “goodness”? Though they were prepared to die, God spared their lives, and in the process gave a marvelous testimony of His power to the greatest ruler

in the world of that day. They also received a promotion in the bureaucracy of the Babylonian Empire.

Of course, we must realize that every exercise of moral virtue will not yield the same positive results as those experienced by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In the same way that many saints throughout the ages have remained faithful to Christ to the point of death and have suffered horrible tortures because of their stands for Christ, we need to recognize that standing for what is right will sometimes lead to suffering in the short run. In fact, Peter himself addresses that very issue in I Peter 2:18-25, when he exhorts believers to do good even when it hurts and uses Jesus as an example.

## THE NEED TO CULTIVATE GOODNESS

When Peter encourages his readers to add goodness to their faith, he implies that faith is of little consequence without it. This is the same point made at greater length by James, the brother of Jesus, in James 2:14-26. This again is a familiar passage. In these verses, James argues cogently that faith that is not put into practice is not faith at all. He makes it clear that one who claims to have faith, but does not show it by the way he lives, possesses the kind of faith that can never save him.

The first example James gives does not involve doing good in the face of evil, but it does involve doing good in the face of misfortune. The one of whom James speaks must cope, not with wickedness, but with need. In some ways, though, it is almost harder to do good in the face of need than when confronted with evil. When Daniel's three friends were told to bow down to the idol, they had a choice - they could stand or they could sin. When confronted with need, however, we often opt for the third choice - to do nothing in the hope that someone else will meet the need.

James then goes on to speak of the example of Abraham. The pressure under which Abraham obeyed God was not temptation to do evil, though surely the act God had required of him was something he would have classified as evil had it been suggested by someone else. The pressure to disobey was nonetheless enormous, and Abraham resisted that pressure in the assurance that God would return his son to him safely.

Rahab is the example given by James that best fits our definition of goodness. She stood firm in protecting the Israelite spies despite the implied threats of her own people. Though she may not have handled the situation in the best way (Rahab is universally commended in Scripture for her faith, but not for the lie she told), Rahab certainly stands as an example of goodness because she put her faith into action, standing against the temptation to do what was wrong.

## AN ILLUSTRATION OF ONE WHO LACKED GOODNESS

What of the other side of the picture? If goodness is an essential companion to saving faith, as James states and Peter implies, we should be able to find some examples of those whose faith withered because of the lack of the kind of moral courage we have been discussing in this lesson. See if your students can come up with some examples. Jesus gives a general illustration that shows the futility of faith apart from "goodness" in the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9,18-23). In the case of the seed that fell into the rocky soil, the plant grew rapidly, but quickly died when the sun

came out. The point of the analogy is that those who are unable to withstand the pressures of evil, such as persecution and ridicule, soon fall away from the faith. In the instance of the seed that fell into the weedy soil, we find that it grew, but the life was choked out of it because of the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches. In either situation, the person in question was unable to withstand the pressures of evil and do good in obedience to God. Their professions turned out to be false, revealed as empty by the inability to stand firm in obedience.

Among the characters of Scripture, Demas stands out as an example of this kind of false faith that lacked moral steadfastness. Paul, shortly before his death, wrote to Timothy that Demas had forsaken him because of his love of the world (II Timothy 4:10). The pressures to do evil are not always of the overt variety faced by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Often, they involve the death of faith by a thousand small compromises, which ultimately draw a person far from God and reveal the falseness of his original profession. Thus Demas serves as our final example of the importance of Peter's admonition to add "goodness" to our faith.



## CHRISTIAN CHARACTER IV

### Knowledge

After having instructed his readers to add goodness, or moral vigor, to their faith, Peter then goes on in II Peter 1:5 to tell them that they need to add knowledge to their moral vigor. Today, we will look at that knowledge that Peter tells his readers they need to have.

#### THE MEANING OF KNOWLEDGE

Unlike the word we studied last week, which was used only a few times in Scripture, this week's word is used frequently. In fact, it is the common Greek word for "knowledge" (which survives in English in words such as "agnostic" and "Gnosticism"). As a result, we are able to derive nothing profound from the meaning of the word itself. Later in the lesson we will look at what we may learn from its usage in other passages.

We ought to comment at this point, however, on the Jewish understanding of the concept of knowledge. When we use the word, we normally use it in a cognitive sense, referring to information stored in the brain. For the Jews in the days when the Bible was written, knowledge was not a cognitive concept, but a moral one, very closely tied to the idea of wisdom (compare, for instance, Proverbs 1:7 and Proverbs 9:10). That wisdom began with the knowledge of God Himself and issued in practical godliness. Consequently, Peter is not just telling his readers to master a body of information. He is telling them that they need to cultivate practical wisdom and discernment through growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

#### AN ILLUSTRATION OF KNOWLEDGE

If this is the case, who could provide a better example of knowledge than Solomon, the author of the Bible's greatest treatise on knowledge as the Jews understood it. The Bible tells us about Solomon's great wisdom on several occasions, but really only provides one specific example of that wisdom outside of the sayings contained in the book of Proverbs. That example is found in I Kings 3:16-28.

In this familiar story, two prostitutes come to Solomon with a request to settle a dispute. Both lived and worked in the same bordello, and both had borne children a short time before. One of the infants had died in the night when its mother had inadvertently rolled over on it and smothered it. The mother of the dead child had gotten up in the middle of the night and placed her child in bed with the other woman, and taken the other woman's baby as her own. Thus, when the two women appeared before Solomon, each claimed to be the mother of the living child while insisting that the dead baby belonged to the other woman.

As an aside, we should note that this story presents certain ironies in the light of our culture. How would this situation have been handled in modern America? In all probability, it would never have arisen. Pregnancies present serious threats to the money-making ability of prostitutes. In our day, both women probably would have chosen to abort their children before they were born. Instead of fighting for a living child, they would have taken their own children's lives. The only reason they might seek out a courtroom would be to ensure their continuing right to kill their own children!

Be that as it may, we need to move on to consider the wisdom of Solomon's judgment. First of all, we must recognize that this was a difficult case. Today, with the medical technology available to us, it would be fairly easy to determine which baby belonged to which mother. In Solomon's day, no such technology was available. It boiled down to a case of one person's word against that of another. Without specific knowledge of either person, such disputes are virtually impossible to resolve.

Solomon decided to do something calculated to bring out the maternal instinct in the true mother. As everyone knows, he suggested cutting the live baby in half and giving half to each woman. While the real mother's response is predictable, it is difficult to imagine any woman giving the answer put forward by the baby thief. What could have made the mother of the dead baby respond in such a callous fashion? She must have nursed terrible bitterness toward the other woman. Stealing her baby is one thing, but allowing it to be killed in front of the real mother's eyes is something quite different. Maybe her pain at the death of her own child, combined with the knowledge that she had been inadvertently responsible for it, caused her to want the other woman to feel the same hurt she was feeling. In any case, she responded in a way that made the identity of the true mother obvious.

What does this story tell us about knowledge? For one thing, it indicates that the knowledge that we are to cultivate is the kind of practical wisdom that will lead us and others in the direction of godly living. Solomon's wisdom did not just allow him to *know* - it also allowed him to make discerning judgments and give valuable counsel. This is the kind of knowledge Peter tells us to add to our moral vigor.

## THE VALUE AND LIMITATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

At this point in the lesson, we need to move on to examine other New Testament passages that speak of knowledge. Such a study will help us to get a clearer picture of both the value and the limitations of the knowledge we are seeking to cultivate. In fact, the New Testament uses the common Greek word for "knowledge" in two senses.

The first type of knowledge spoken of in the New Testament is the knowledge that belongs to God and is given by God to His children (Romans 11:33; Colossians 2:3; Luke 1:77). This knowledge that is given to all Christians is principally the knowledge of God Himself (II Corinthians 2:14; 4:6; Philippians 3:8; II Peter 3:18). This knowledge is limited only by our sinfulness and finiteness - we simply are not capable of comprehending all that God is (Ephesians 3:19).

Another kind of knowledge of which the New Testament speaks is a special gift of the Spirit, involving practical discernment, which is given to some in the church for the edification of its members (I Corinthians 12:8; 14:6). This knowledge has value, but it also has the potential to stimulate pride in those who possess it (I Corinthians 8:1) or to make a person insensitive to the weaknesses of others (I Corinthians 8:10-11). In any case, this type of knowledge is of little value if not exercised in the context of love (I Corinthians 13:2) and is purely temporal (I Corinthians 13:8).

Ask your students which of these two senses Peter has in mind in II Peter 1:5. Hopefully, they should recognize that, since he is speaking to all Christians and not just those who “have the gift,” he is referring to the knowledge of God Himself. This is the same knowledge in which he encourages all Christians to grow at the end of this epistle. This knowledge leads to a life of practical wisdom and godliness, but it is not in any sense restricted to those who possess the gift of knowledge given by the Holy Spirit.

#### AN ILLUSTRATION OF ONE WHO LACKED KNOWLEDGE

Why does Peter encourage his readers to add knowledge to goodness? What are the consequences for one who possesses moral vigor but lacks practical wisdom? Ask your students if they can think of any examples that would illustrate the futility of moral vigor unless it is coupled with the practical wisdom that comes through the knowledge of God.

In secular literature, the main character in Shakespeare’s play *Othello* provides a good example of how deadly moral vigor can be if it is not coupled with practical wisdom. Othello, married to the lovely Desdemona, opens his ears to the innuendos and slanders spoken against her by his jealous lieutenant, the fiendish Iago. Eventually, Iago manages to convince Othello that his wife has been unfaithful, and he strangles her in their bed. Once he discovers that he has been duped by the villain, he describes himself as “one who loved, not wisely, but too well,” then proceeds to take his own life. Few pieces of literature illustrate more clearly the kind of “adding” that Peter advocates.

The Bible also gives us a good example of a person who possessed great moral vigor (at least in some areas of his life) but exercised little discernment. That person is Samson. Once we recognize that his moral vigor displayed itself in his opposition to the enemies of God’s people, though not in his personal life, we can see that he fits into the category of which we are speaking. The lack of judgment he displayed in his dealings with Delilah certainly reveals him to be one who lacked practical discernment, despite his moral outrage at the predatory behavior of the Philistines. In the end, Samson accomplished nothing. By the time he died, his relationship to God was so shaky that he did not even recognize the departure of the Holy Spirit, and he left the Israelites in much the same condition in which he had found them - under the control of the lords of the Philistines.

In conclusion, we need to recognize the importance of exercising moral vigor with discernment, and out of a growing comprehension of the knowledge of God and His Son, Jesus Christ.



## **CHRISTIAN CHARACTER V**

### Self-Control

The next piece of the puzzle provided by Peter as he constructs a full picture of Christian character is that of self-control. This is one of the traits that Peter's list has in common with that presented by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23.

#### THE MEANING OF SELF-CONTROL

The word Peter uses in this passage is an intensive form of the Greek verb meaning "to hold." A self-controlled or temperate person is thus one who is able to hold himself in, or keep himself under containment. Basically, the quality that Peter has in mind has to do with ruling one's emotions and physical appetites rather than being ruled by them.

Different forms of the word appear seven times in the New Testament (Acts 24:25; I Corinthians 7:9; 9:25; Galatians 5:23; Titus 1:8; and twice in our passage, II Peter 1:6). Later in the lesson, we will consider some of these passages more carefully in order to expand our understanding of the characteristic that Peter is encouraging Christians to cultivate.

#### AN ILLUSTRATION OF SELF-CONTROL

Aside from Jesus Himself, there is perhaps no finer example in Scripture of one who possessed the trait of self-control than Joseph. Ask your students to name incidents in the life of Joseph where he displayed self-control, then discuss each in turn. The following incidents should be mentioned in the course of your discussion.

Before getting into the incidents where Joseph displayed self-control, it might be worth noting that he was not born with the trait. In Genesis 37, he seems to have been a bit of a brat, eager to throw in his brothers' faces the dreams that God sent him. He did not do a very good job of controlling his pride. As we will see later, self-control is not natural. It comes only through the work of the Spirit of God, and the means He often uses to cultivate it is suffering. After all, if one suffers neither temptation nor frustration, how will one find the opportunities to learn to control oneself?

In any case, Joseph did not lack for opportunities. The first came when he was enticed by Potiphar's wife. It would have been very easy for him to rationalize yielding to his raging hormones by arguing that he had to obey the instructions of his master's wife. But Joseph refused to take the easy way out, controlled his lusts, and suffered the consequences when Potiphar's wife told her husband that Joseph had tried to take advantage of her.

When Potiphar had Joseph thrown into prison, he controlled his anger. It would have been very easy for Joseph to become bitter and sullen. Instead, he behaved like a model prisoner and soon gained the confidence of the jailer as well as his fellow prisoners. His ability to control his anger and recognize that God was the master of his circumstances allowed him to gain respect in the eyes of

those around him. It was this respect that eventually led to his release, as he gained the opportunity to interpret Pharaoh's dream.

Once he had become one of the chief rulers of Egypt, Joseph again had an opportunity to exercise self-control. This arose when his brothers came down to Egypt to find food during the famine that Pharaoh's dream had predicted would happen. It would have been very easy under these circumstances for Joseph to give in to the desire for vengeance. He now had the power to strike back at the brothers who had callously sold him into slavery many years before. He easily could have convinced himself that they deserved punishment, and that God had delivered them into his hands for that very purpose. Yet he resisted the temptation, instead showing mercy to his brothers and providing a safe place for his family to live during the remaining years of famine.

### THE NEED TO CULTIVATE SELF-CONTROL

Why is self-control such an important trait for a Christian to develop? An examination of the New Testament passages where the word is used should help us answer that question. Since there are only five uses of the word outside of our passage in II Peter, it will be easy for us to look at all of them.

In Acts 24:25, the Roman governor Felix invited Paul to speak to his wife and himself, and Paul, we are told, "discoursed on righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come." The result was that Felix was afraid and sent Paul away, though he called him back again and again, apparently fascinated by the message of the veteran missionary. Though the passage does not indicate specifically what about Paul's words frightened Felix, it is safe to assume that his lack of righteousness and self-control caused him to fear what would happen to him in the day of judgment. Even the conscience of an unbeliever tells him that lack of self-control is a mark against him in the sight of God. How much more does lack of self-control in the life of a Christian set up barriers between himself and God, causing continual feelings of guilt and shame?

The next passage where the word appears is I Corinthians 7:9. Here, Paul advises those who cannot control their sexual desires to marry. People today have many reasons for getting married, but one rarely hears anyone give the one cited by Paul in this verse. It apparently is so important for a Christian to possess self control that even so serious a step as marriage may be a legitimate means for achieving that end.

Ask your class why self-control is viewed by Paul as being a matter of such grave importance. They should realize that self-control has a direct bearing upon one's reputation and testimony before the world. How many ministries have been wrecked because those involved in the ministries have been unable to control their lusts for sexual gratification, power, and money?

Paul brings up another aspect of this same point in I Corinthians 9:25. In this verse, our word is translated "goes into strict training." Despite the examples all around us of athletes who lack self-control off the playing field, few occupations require more discipline in order to achieve success. Paul thus uses the conditioning regimen of the athlete to illustrate the self-control needed by the person who is engaged in Christian service. A quick survey of the context helps us see that Paul

extends self-control even into the areas of lawful behavior. He is not here talking about avoiding sexual lusts. Instead, he argues that legitimate desires must sometimes be controlled and denied for the sake of the ministry in which he is engaged. In order to reach people from different cultural backgrounds, he needs to place his own preferences to one side. He needs to concern himself more with the customs and taboos of those he hopes to reach than with his own desires, no matter how legitimate. What this verse tells us is that self-control is essential in the realm of Christian service. No one can effectively serve others unless he effectively controls his own desires, even to the point of denying legitimate wants and needs.

The fourth use of the word is in the familiar listing of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. The point to be noted here is that self-control is not something that is part of the natural equipment with which we are born. Any parent who has had the opportunity to raise children has quickly found out that children have no innate sense of self-control. Self-gratification is all they know from birth. The only way to overcome this natural propensity is through the transforming power of the Spirit of God. And since we have already seen that self-control is essential for a Christian's service and witness, such transformation of character is not an option for any Christian.

Titus 1:8 is the final use of the word before our passage. Here Paul lists self-control as one of the character qualities essential for the eldership. One who wishes to rule over others must first be able to rule over himself.

#### AN EXAMPLE OF ONE WHO LACKED SELF-CONTROL

Perhaps the best example of the havoc wreaked by a person who lacks self-control is that of Samson, but since we used him last week as an example of one who lacked wisdom, we will turn instead to the man we used last week as a *good* example - Solomon. The value of Solomon's example is that, since he was clearly a wise man, he shows us what happens when a person fails to follow Peter's admonition to *add* self-control to his knowledge.

In I Kings 11:1-13, we are told of Solomon's many wives. While anyone who accumulates seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines could never be accused of self-control, we need to recognize the ways in which Solomon was exercising lack of self-control in this situation. The first thing that obviously comes to mind is the matter of sexual lust. All we need to do to see that lust was a factor in Solomon's accumulation of wives is to look at the early chapters of Ecclesiastes, where in his old age he speaks of his pursuit of pleasure and the emptiness that resulted.

But Solomon's lack of self-control shows up in another area as well. Most of the wives he married were the result of political alliances (I Kings 11:3 tells us that his seven hundred wives were of royal birth). It seems that Solomon's lust for power was practically insatiable, to the extent that he was willing to disobey the clear commandments of the law against contracting marriages with idolaters in order to gratify that lust.

The result was that Solomon himself turned away from the Lord in his latter years and led Israel to do the same. The idol temples he built for the use of his wives became a temptation that the Israelites could not resist, and the next three hundred and fifty years of Jewish history are

blackened with the stain of idolatry. God's judgment against Solomon's lack of self-control was the division of the kingdom, which occurred shortly after Solomon's death.

From the example of Solomon, we can learn that wisdom quickly turns to foolishness unless it is accompanied by self-control. The Christian who cannot control his own desires, for his own good and for the good of the Kingdom of God, quickly brings ruin upon himself. Furthermore, the leader who lacks self-control brings down not only himself, but also those over whom he has been given shepherding responsibilities.

## CHRISTIAN CHARACTER VI

### Perseverance

Peter adds yet another piece to the puzzle he has been constructing, bringing us a still more complete picture of Christian character. The piece he adds this week is the trait of perseverance.

#### THE MEANING OF PERSEVERANCE

The word translated “perseverance” in II Peter 1:6 (NIV) or “steadfastness” (ESV) is the Greek word most frequently translated “patience” in the King James Version. It is a form of a Greek verb which means “to wait, remain, or stay,” preceded by a preposition meaning “under.” Thus the word, which literally means “to stay under,” conveys the idea of waiting diligently, staying for the long haul, or, in common parlance, “hanging in there,” making “perseverance” a good translation. The word is a common one in the New Testament, often implying perseverance in the face of opposition or suffering. One who perseveres remains under the hand of God, even when that hand carries painful experiences.

#### AN ILLUSTRATION OF PERSEVERANCE

In searching for an illustration of this character trait, we need not look far, since the Bible itself sets forth one man as being a clear exemplar of perseverance. James 5:11 invites us to consider the perseverance of Job. That will be our task in this portion of the lesson.

We see the first instance of Job’s perseverance in Job 1:20-22. Immediately after the string of disasters strikes his family and his possessions, he praises God and acknowledges that the One who gives also has the right to take away. Too many who profess faith in Christ are driven to question their faith by every reversal they experience. Few would have survived the kinds of blows Job endured without raising some serious questions. Thus Job serves as an example to us, even in the immediate aftermath of his calamities, simply because few of us would have made it even this far without questioning God, our faith, or both.

Job’s perseverance is on display next in Job 2:9-10. By this time, his body is covered with painful sores, and his wife, who should be supporting him in his troubles, is telling him to curse God and die. Yet Job again hangs onto his faith and affirms God’s right to bring tragedy into his life.

Next, Job’s friends arrive. They are often referred to as “comforters,” but they offered scant comfort. Instead, they assured Job that he must be harboring some hidden sin for which God was punishing him. In the face of these less than helpful accusations, Job both maintained his personal innocence and refused to bring charges against God. Even when he had reached the depths of despair so that he wished only to die, he continued to persevere in his faith in God (Job 6:10). Throughout the book, as the dialogue continues, Job steadfastly maintains both his own innocence and God’s goodness. Job only shows signs of breaking down when he begins to ask the question, “Why?” (Job 24:1). Yet even here, his faith remains firm. In the end, Job, despite his lapse (for which he repents at the beginning of chapter 42), is praised by God for his steadfastness, in contrast to the foolish explanations given by his friends (Job 42:7-9).

## THE NEED TO CULTIVATE PERSEVERANCE

Why, then, is it important to cultivate perseverance? For one thing, perseverance is a mark of true faith. It is only those who endure to the end who will be saved (Matthew 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13). Unlike the seed that springs up in rocky soil in the Parable of the Sower, the person characterized by perseverance does not wilt and die when the sun gets hot. He produces fruit in all kinds of weather.

Furthermore, perseverance is a source of Christian growth. In Romans 5:1-5, Paul speaks of the progress that the Christian experiences as the result of suffering. Such benefits are gained only when one perseveres through the suffering, however. One who, like Job, continues to trust God through his pain, cultivates spiritual muscles that will never atrophy.

We should also note at this point that perseverance implies more than a mere passive acceptance of God's providence, or resignation to the will of God when that will is painful to bear. Remember that Job not only accepted what came from the hand of God, but also praised God in the midst of it all.

Next, perseverance should be cultivated by the Christian because it focuses our attention on the hope that Christ has set before us (Romans 8:25). The persevering Christian is one who has his mind fixed on eternal values and an eternal destiny. In the light of such marvelous promises, the sufferings of this present life shrink in significance, and we are able to praise God despite the pain we experience (Romans 8:18; Philippians 3:7-11).

Lastly, it is vital to consider that perseverance, like all aspects of Christian character, is a gift of God's grace. In II Corinthians 12:7-10, Paul not only recognized that he persevered by the grace of God, but also acknowledged that his very weakness became the means by which God brought greater glory to Himself. God gives us the strength to endure the things we must suffer, and in the process brings honor to His name.

## AN ILLUSTRATION OF ONE WHO LACKED PERSEVERANCE

At this point in your lesson, ask the members of your class to suggest examples of those in Scripture who lacked perseverance. John Mark comes readily to mind, though he ultimately returned to the work of the Gospel and became a profitable servant of God. Demas is another good example, though we discussed him earlier in the course. Judas provides a strong illustration of the dangers of falling away from the faith, since he appeared to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ along with the other disciples, yet turned away, even to the extent of betraying the Savior. Another New Testament example might be the Ephesian church in Revelation 2:1-7, which was in danger of forsaking their first love and falling away.

Having taken suggestions from the class, turn to an Old Testament example of lack of perseverance - Aaron in Exodus 32. Aaron provides a particularly good illustration of the point Peter is trying to make because, while he possessed self-control in his daily life, he lacked the ability to

remain steadfast under pressure. He thus gives us a good picture of one who needed to add perseverance to his self-control.

Aaron handled pressure well as long as Moses was there to give him help and support. After all, Aaron had been God's spokesman before Pharaoh, speaking the words Moses had received from God. He was no stranger to pressure and pain. As soon as Moses disappeared into the clouds above Mount Sinai, however, Aaron became susceptible to external pressures. When the people insisted that he build a golden calf as a visible representation of the God they worshiped, Aaron succumbed to their pressure and supervised the construction of the idol. He was unable to hold up under even the threat of persecution without Moses to support him.

The experience of Aaron teaches us an important lesson about cultivating perseverance, and that is that God works to develop this character trait in us through the help of others. When we experience suffering, the worst possible thing to do is to go into a shell and shut ourselves off from other Christians. If we do that, we become vulnerable, like Aaron was, to the temptation to cave in under pressure. Few of us have the strength of Job, who was able to stand firm when everyone, even his wife and his best friends, seemed to turn against him and pressure him to turn against God.

We need to recognize that God cultivates perseverance in each of His children, not only through the experiences He brings into our lives, but also through the people that He places around us. These people help by giving us support in times of pain and suffering, providing the strength that is needed in order to persevere.



## CHRISTIAN CHARACTER VII

### Godliness

The next piece Peter adds to the growing picture of Christian character in II Peter 1:5-7 is the trait of godliness.

#### THE MEANING OF GODLINESS

At first glance, “godliness,” used by both the NIV and ESV, may seem to be a misleading translation for the Greek word behind it. The Greek word is a compound made up of the word for “good” and one of many Greek verbs which may be translated “to worship” [the same word was the name of the first great church historian, Eusebius]. The word therefore means “good worship,” and should be understood as speaking of reverence or piety. The term “godliness,” on the other hand, tends to imply holy living or Christlikeness. While the Bible consistently speaks of holy living and Christlikeness as the results of an attitude of reverence toward God, the two are not the same thing. The important thing to note is that the character quality Peter is advocating in today’s lesson involves not so much behavior toward man as behavior toward God. A godly man is one whose attitudes and actions toward God are right and pleasing to Him.

#### AN ILLUSTRATION OF GODLINESS

Ask your students to give some examples of “godliness” (reverence) from Scripture. They may suggest Moses before the burning bush, Job and his daily sacrifices for his children, Daniel and his regular prayer life, any number of people who fell down and worshiped Christ upon some great display of His power, or the elaborate cleansing rituals required of the Old Testament priests before they could serve in the Temple or enter into God’s presence in the Holy of Holies. All of these are good examples. The one we want to look at today, however (one of your students will probably come up with this one), is the example of Isaiah when he received his prophetic commission from God (Isaiah 6).

Read through Isaiah 6 with your class. In this chapter, Isaiah saw a vision of the Lord in the Temple. To begin with, we should note that he saw an example of godliness when he observed the behavior of the angels who surrounded the throne of God. How did they show their reverence for the Lord? They covered their faces to show that they were not worthy to look upon the glory of the Lord; they covered their feet, perhaps because, in the circumstances under which Isaiah lived, the feet were almost perpetually dirty, and he would have understood the covering of the feet as showing a desire to hide from God that which was unclean (this is not to suggest that angels are sinful, dirty, or in any way in need of cleansing - after all, this was a vision, and was intended to communicate to Isaiah); they were hovering about the throne, prepared for immediate obedience to the commands of God; and they were crying out words of praise and worship to the Lord.

Isaiah clearly followed the example he saw before him. He, too, recognized that God is too holy for lesser beings to look upon. He, too, understood the inappropriateness of coming before God in a state of uncleanness, and acknowledged his own sin and the sin of his people. He, too, worshiped God by praising Him as the Almighty King. And he, too, showed himself ready for

obedient service in whatever area God would command him to serve. In connection with this last point, we should note that Isaiah was willing to obey without question, despite the fact that God informed him before he started that his ministry would be a failure. Isaiah didn't dare ask why, but simply asked, "How long?"

We may sum up what Isaiah's example teaches about "godliness," then, by noting that godliness consists of four things: a humble attitude toward God because of His glory, acknowledgment of sin before God because of His holiness, words of praise to God because of His majesty, and submissive obedience to God because of His lordship.

## THE NEED TO CULTIVATE GODLINESS

The word that is the subject of today's study occurs most frequently in the Pastoral Epistles, written by Paul to Timothy and Titus. In those three letters, Paul has quite a bit to say about the importance of cultivating reverence. Spend a few minutes with your class looking at each of the following verses, which should give them a clearer picture of why godliness is essential for the Christian.

- In I Timothy 2:2, Paul says that Timothy should instruct his people to pray for those in authority so that Christians may worship God in peace and without interference. How often do we pray for our national leaders because we desire to go unhindered in our worship?
- In I Timothy 2:9-10, Paul indicates that godliness is such an important characteristic that it will influence the way Christians dress. Those who honor God will show their respect for Him in every aspect of their lives.
- In I Timothy 3:16, the word seems to be used in a slightly different way, but at least suggests that Christians ought to bow and worship before the awesome plan of salvation devised and carried out by the Son of God.
- In I Timothy 4:7-8, Paul encourages Timothy to train himself in godliness like an athlete trains himself for competition. Anyone who has really attempted to take the worship of God seriously knows it is hard work, and requires concentrated preparation, effort, and practice.
- In I Timothy 5:4, Paul indicates that godliness is required of widows who are to receive the support of the church.
- In I Timothy 6:3-6, Paul speaks of the pride of those who presume to speak of God, yet show no reverence in their lives. Such people are motivated by desire for self-aggrandizement and cause nothing but trouble. On the other hand, one who cultivates godliness gains along with it a peace and contentment that is inaccessible to those who know nothing of bowing before a holy God.
- In I Timothy 6:11, Paul encourages Timothy to flee the temptations of money and power and seek instead for godliness and its accompanying virtues.

- In his second letter to Timothy, Paul notes that godliness can also have its negative aspects. In II Timothy 3:5, Paul speaks of the surface kind of godliness that is displayed by false teachers, then in verse 11 indicates that true godliness often attracts persecution.
- In Titus 1:1, Paul speaks of the Gospel he preaches as producing a knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness. One who truly knows God cannot help but show reverence in His presence. Godliness is thus a sign of true conversion, and is something in which all Christians should be growing.
- In Titus 2:12, he again indicates that the grace of God in the lives of Christians will produce godliness, which in turn will be worked out in the Christian's manner of living.

We should also note in passing that Peter uses the word several other times - in II Peter 2:9, he says that those who are godly will be delivered by God from trials (though he didn't say they would be delivered from *having* trials), and in II Peter 3:11-12, he speaks of the importance of reverence in the light of the coming of the Day of Judgment.

#### AN ILLUSTRATION OF ONE WHO LACKED GODLINESS

Peter encourages his readers to add godliness to perseverance. Steadfastness in the faith needs to be accompanied by an attitude of reverence toward God. Perhaps the best illustration of this truth is found in the strange story of Uzzah in II Samuel 6:1-7.

David wanted to bring the Ark of the Covenant to his new capital city of Jerusalem. It had been resting in a small town in Judah in the home of Abinadab. David sent a contingent of soldiers to escort the Ark, which was placed on an ox cart, driven by Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab. Uzzah was undoubtedly a stalwart young man, but the events that followed showed that he lacked reverence. When the oxen stumbled, the Ark began to slide off the cart, and Uzzah reached out and grabbed it to keep it from falling. The problem was that the Ark represented the presence of God, and therefore was only to be touched by certain people under certain very carefully defined circumstances. Uzzah, putting practical considerations ahead of God's command, ignored those restrictions and was struck dead on the spot as a result.

God clearly considers a reverent attitude on the part of His people to be of the utmost importance. Steadfastness in the faith cannot make up for a lack of reverence before the Lord whom we serve.



## CHRISTIAN CHARACTER VIII

### Brotherly Kindness

Having instructed his readers about the proper attitude toward God - one of humble reverence, Peter now turns in II Peter 1:7 to his readers' relationships to one another. He tells them that they must add to their reverence toward God an attitude of brotherly kindness or affection toward each other.

#### THE MEANING OF BROTHERLY KINDNESS

Today's word should be a familiar one, though it is only used a few times in the New Testament. The word for "brotherly kindness" or "brotherly love" is, of course, *philadelphia*. The word is a compound formed from one of the Greek verbs for "love," *phileo* (the mutual love of friendship rather than the sensual love implied by *eros* or the selfless *agape* that reaches out independent of the response of the loved one, which will be our topic next week), and the noun meaning "brother." In other words, what Peter is encouraging is a mutual love based on a shared standing. In the same way that members of the same family love one another because they belong to the family, so Christians should love one another because they are members together of the Body of Christ.

#### ILLUSTRATIONS OF BROTHERLY KINDNESS

Ask your students to come up with examples from Scripture of brotherly love. The examples they suggest will show you how well they understand the concept under consideration. To get them started in the right direction, tell them to think about some of the incidents from the life of David.

That hint should produce at least one obvious response. I doubt that there is any better illustration of brotherly love in all of Scripture than the relationship of David and Jonathan in I Samuel 20. Ask your students to point out examples of their selflessness, as well as the mutuality of their relationship. They should note that Jonathan was willing to risk the wrath of his father in order to protect David, gave David valuable gifts, and willingly acknowledged that David would one day sit on the throne instead of himself. David, on the other hand, trusted Jonathan implicitly and promised to show kindness to the members of Jonathan's family, even though they might be construed as threatening the stability of his kingdom (remember Mephibosheth?). When Jonathan died, David eulogized him as being a friend whose love was greater than that of any woman known to David. [NOTE: To attempt to read any hint of homosexuality into this relationship is a travesty. Homosexuality was considered a gross sin and an abomination worthy of death. If this is what David meant when he mourned the death of Jonathan, he hardly would have announced it publicly. The perversions of modern America should not be permitted to cloud the beauty of a relationship that should serve as a model for the type of brotherly love advocated by Peter and other authors of Scripture. Furthermore, David's relationships with women were often not of the most successful variety.]

It is worth noting, however, that brotherly love may also be perverted in a way that is all too common. In the same sense that a patriot who proclaims, "My country, right or wrong," is allowing

his love to corrupt his judgment and justify wrong behavior, so some friendships become destructive when they serve as an excuse for rationalizing wrongdoing. The sons of Zeruah, Joab, Asahel, and Abishai, who served in David's army, are perfect examples of this perverted kind of brotherly love. They were men of fierce loyalties, both to David and to their brothers. Thus, when Asahel was killed by Abner in a fair fight, Joab murdered Abner in cold blood. Abishai had been prepared to kill Saul while he was asleep on the ground, but David stopped him. Joab later willingly sent Uriah to his death, Abishai urged David to let him strike Shimei dead after the latter had insulted David, and Joab murdered Absalom after he had gotten his head caught in a tree branch. Mutual love and loyalty is good, but it should never become an excuse for sin.

Another instructive example of brotherly love is that of Joseph. His willingness to forgive, help, and shelter his brothers despite the fact that they had sold him into slavery in Egypt shows us that brotherly love may sometimes need to be exercised toward those who do not return that love. Joseph helped his brothers because they were his brothers, not because they showed love to him. As we deal with fellow Christians, we may find that not all our brothers in Christ show love to us in the way they should. This does not relieve us of the responsibility to show love to them, for no other reason than because they are our brothers.

## THE NEED TO CULTIVATE BROTHERLY KINDNESS

The actual uses of the term *philadelphia* in the New Testament are few enough that we can easily examine them all. In addition to II Peter 1:7, the word is used five times in the New Testament (not counting, of course, the times when it refers to the city in Asia Minor).

The first of these references is in Romans 12:10. Among the general moral exhortations of the passage is one involving love for the other members of the church. Note that Paul connects this with the need to consider others above oneself. The fact that love is mutual does not preclude the necessity of putting the other person's interests before one's own. The kinds of relationships that should develop in the church are those where people constantly put one another first. Brotherly love does not mean "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." It is this kind of love that gave the church in the early chapters of the book of Acts such a good testimony in the pagan world. The citizens of Jerusalem marveled at how much these people loved one another.

The next reference, in I Thessalonians 4:9, is one where Paul treats the need for brotherly love as a self-evident truth. Contrary to the sentiments of the Declaration of Independence, the truth that should be self-evident for the Christian is that he is to pursue the happiness of his brother rather than his own. Paul goes on to encourage those who are already showing this trait to continue to grow in it, since no one ever arrives at a state of perfection in his practice of this character quality.

The next reference is found in Hebrews 13:1, where the writer of Hebrews follows up his exhortation to brotherly love by using examples of strangers and those who are in prison. The fact of the matter is that Christians do not know all of their Christian brothers and sisters personally. This does not excuse them from the responsibility to show love to these brothers and sisters. What makes the Body of Christ unique, among other things, is the instant bond that Christians have with other believers whom they have never met before. The kind of hospitality toward strangers that the

author mentions was essential for the spreading of the Gospel in the first century, since traveling evangelists depended on the hospitality of those among whom they ministered to sustain themselves. Christians were also beginning to face persecution, so it was essential for the church to care for its members who were suffering unjust imprisonment for the sake of Christ (in those days prisoners were responsible for their own food and clothing, which thus had to be brought to them by friends and relatives). Such examples of brotherly love were an important part of displaying the unity of the Body of Christ and spreading the Gospel in the ancient world.

Peter also gives exhortations to brotherly love in his first letter. In both I Peter 1:22 and I Peter 3:8 he tells his readers about the importance of loving one another deeply and sincerely, with humility, and from the heart, rather than just going through the motions.

Perhaps the most familiar exposition of this subject, however, is one that does not specifically use the word we are studying today. The book of I John has quite a bit to say about the importance of loving the brethren (I John 2:10; 3:10-14, 23; 4:7-12, 20-21; 5:1-2). The main point of these verses is that love for other Christians is one of the main pieces of evidence that gives a person the confidence that he has been reborn by the Spirit of God. In other words, the fact that we love other Christians helps to give us assurance of our own salvation.

In conclusion, brotherly love is essential because it presents a strong testimony to the world, helps cement the Body of Christ together in unity, and gives individual Christians confidence of their own standing before God.

#### ILLUSTRATIONS OF SOME WHO LACKED BROTHERLY KINDNESS

Like the other qualities bestowed by the Spirit of God, brotherly love is not natural. The popular phrase that clearly demonstrates this truth is “sibling rivalry.” The fact of the matter is that brothers and sisters too often fight like cats and dogs. They are jealous of one another, competitive in the extreme, and resent attention given to other siblings. Since brotherly love is a work of God in us, and since Peter exhorts us to add love of the brethren to our reverence for God, we should expect to find in Scripture a few examples of those who, despite their reverence for God, wreaked havoc because they failed to love their brothers.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this is found in the story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob may have been a scheming rascal, but he seems to have had a genuine faith in God. He certainly valued the birthright and blessing more than Esau did, and he seemed to value them because of their spiritual components. In any case, he certainly did not add brotherly love to his reverence for God. In fact, he tricked and abused his brother in order to gain spiritual and material benefits for himself. The consequences were ruinous, of course, as he destroyed his relationship with his brother and was forced to leave his family. One who loves God will accomplish little good in this world if that love does not work itself out in his attitude toward his brothers.

What is true of blood relatives is even more true of brothers and sisters in Christ, of course. The New Testament provides an example of this in Philippians 4:2-3, where two women in the Philippian church, Euodia and Syntyche, were disrupting the church with their fighting and feuding.

Unfortunately, too many churches have been torn apart, and their witness in the community lost, because of fighting among the members of the congregation. Often the fighting involves personality clashes, long-standing grudges and bitterness, or differences about incidental matters of the faith. In any case, anyone who claims to love God, and yet uses that love for God as a club with which to beat his brother or sister over the head, is in danger of destroying the church and damaging, not only his own testimony, but that of Jesus Christ as well.

## CHRISTIAN CHARACTER IX

### Love

Peter finally puts the last piece of the puzzle he has been constructing in II Peter 1:5-7 on the table - the piece representing love. It should come as no surprise to us that the completed picture before us - the picture of Christian character - is a picture of Jesus Christ Himself.

#### THE MEANING OF LOVE

As most Christians have often heard, there are three different Greek words that may be translated “love.” The first, *eros*, refers to sensual passion. The second, *phileo*, is the mutual love associated with friendship that we studied last week. It is the third kind of love, *agape*, that Peter uses to complete his picture of Christian character. This is the word for love that is used more than any other in Scripture. This kind of love cares nothing for mutuality, but is selfless, independent of the response of the one being loved. This is the kind of love that gives without any thought of receiving anything in return. This is the kind of love that characterizes the true Christian.

#### AN ILLUSTRATION OF LOVE

Who but Jesus Himself could serve as our final exemplar? Who could imagine a better illustration of selfless, unconditional love than that of the Savior?

The apostle John, who refers to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” understood the love of Jesus more intimately than most. He has much to say on the subject, both in his Gospel and in his epistles. Divide your class into four groups and assign one of the following passages to each group: John 10:1-18; John 13:1-17, 34-35; John 15:1-17; I John 4:7-21. Have each group go through its assigned passage, record how that passage demonstrates the selfless love of Christ, then report back to the entire class. The following paragraphs include some of the ideas that should be brought out.

In John 10, the very fact that the relationship between Jesus and His people is compared to that between a shepherd and his sheep tells us something about the unconditional nature of Jesus’ love for us. Sheep are hardly in a position to return the care and compassion of the shepherd in a mutual fellowship. The picture shows that Christ’s love is unconditional because of our inability to respond on anything close to the same level. This is a situation where an equal exchange of love is impossible. Furthermore, the passage indicates that the height of selfless love is the act of self-sacrifice. Jesus demonstrated *agape* love when He gave His life for His sheep.

In John 13, Jesus demonstrated selfless love through His humility, as He washed the feet of His disciples - a menial task usually entrusted to the lowest of servants (note that when verse one speaks of Jesus showing His disciples “the full extent of His love,” it is speaking of His death on the cross, not His humility in washing the disciples’ feet). If the Son of God had merely condescended to put Himself on the same level as His creatures, that would have been a great show of humility. But the fact that He humbled Himself to serve those creatures, and did so even further to die for those creatures, is humility beyond our comprehension. Consequently, when Jesus tells His disciples

to love one another as He has loved them, it is this kind of self-denying humility that He has in mind. As Paul points out in Philippians 2:1-4, Christ's example of humility shows us that we should consider others better and more important than ourselves and put their concerns before our own.

In John 15, we see again the themes of self-sacrifice and humility, with the latter expressed in terms of obedience to the commands of God and care for the needs of each other. Jesus showed His love for His people, not only by dying for them, but also by informing, elevating, and empowering them. He told them the words He had received from His Father; He lifted them up to the status of friends; and He gave them all they needed to live fruitful lives. In our own small way, we can show the same kind of love to others by reaching out to them with the life-giving message of the Gospel and discipling them so that they, too, may bear fruit in this world.

In I John 4, many of the same themes reappear. The love of Jesus is revealed in His incarnation as a man and in His sacrifice on the cross. But John also brings out another important point about the love of Jesus in this chapter, and that is that Jesus displayed love by taking the initiative in His relationship with man. He did not love us because we responded (or, by implication, even because He knew we *would* respond) to Him. Instead, He reached out to those who hated Him, who had rebelled against Him and were quite ready to put Him to death should He dare to show His face. The love of God is a love that extends to those who have nothing to recommend them and who are completely undeserving.

#### THE NEED TO CULTIVATE LOVE

In the same way that Jesus is the obvious illustration of perfect love, so I Corinthians 13 is the obvious place to turn to find the Bible's teaching about the need to cultivate love. The passage is a familiar one, but it should help the members of the class to read it in the light of the definition and illustration of love that we have already covered. Note the following:

The first three verses of the chapter indicate that love is needed because without it ministry is useless. While it should come as no surprise that the gifts listed in verses one and two are futile apart from love, verse three is a different matter. What could be more selfless than the kind of giving and self-sacrifice described in this verse? Paul is telling us here that even selfless actions are useless unless they are driven by selfless motives. Love is essential because ministry - even a ministry that involves the ultimate in giving - is an exercise in futility without it.

The second paragraph (verses 4-7) describes love rather than speaking of its importance. Be sure your class notices that all of the characteristics of love listed by Paul involve putting the other person first and considering his needs and desires more important than your own. In fact, one could easily look at the flip side of each of the qualities listed in verses 4-7 and see the image of selfishness.

The remainder of the chapter speaks of the permanence of love. Make sure your class understands that the permanence of love flows from its unconditional nature. Only something that is independent of circumstances can be permanent. If the Christian is growing now into what he will be for all eternity, love, which never changes, is an essential part of that growing process.

## AN ILLUSTRATION OF SOME WHO LACKED LOVE

I was unable to think of an individual in Scripture who could serve as an example of one who demonstrated brotherly kindness but lacked love. I do suspect, however, that the Bible gives us a group that will serve as an example of the danger of having *phileo* without *agape*. That example is the church at Ephesus as described by Jesus through the apostle John in Revelation 2:1-7. Here we see a church that is diligent in maintaining the faith, active in good deeds, suffering for the sake of Christ, and yet doing all this without the love they once had. The Ephesian church, in fact, demonstrates almost all of the character qualities listed in II Peter 1:5-7 *except* that of love. The important thing for your class to note here is that, despite all of their fine qualities, Jesus tells the Ephesian church that they need to repent because of their lack of love. He even threatens them with the loss of opportunity for ministry if they remain in their loveless condition. Thus we must take seriously Peter's admonition to add love to the other qualities he has listed. Without love, the picture is as incomplete and unsatisfying as a puzzle with a missing piece, and Christian character remains underdeveloped and seriously flawed.



## CHRISTIAN CHARACTER X

### Conclusion

As we conclude our study of Peter's picture of Christian character this week, we will examine the conclusions Peter himself draws from the puzzle he has just finished constructing. We noted at the beginning of our study that what Peter was really describing in II Peter 1:5-7 was the process of sanctification. We will see today that those who develop the character traits of which he has spoken, and thus grow closer and closer to the likeness of Jesus Christ, will come to understand the reality of successful Christian living.

### SUCCESSFUL LIVING REQUIRES CHARACTER

As far as the Christian life is concerned, what we are is far more important than what we do. In II Peter 1:8-9, Peter makes the point that those who possess the character traits we have been discussing in this course will never be ineffective or unproductive in their Christian lives. On the other hand, those who do not have these qualities are blind - they are fooling themselves about their true spiritual condition.

At this point in the lesson, go through the character traits one at a time, asking the class members why each one leads to successful living and why it is essential for successful living. This will serve, not only to help your students see the practical value of the qualities listed by Peter, but also to review the contents of this summer's study. Among other things, the following should be noted:

- Faith is necessary for success because without it a person cannot hope to please God, and brings success because the one who has it gains access to resources that go far beyond human strength. He also possesses the contentment that comes from knowing that God is in control of his life.
- Goodness, virtue, or moral fiber is essential for success because it enables a person to stand firm against temptation and avoid compromise, and brings success because one who has it can stand against the winds of moral relativism that constantly sweep through this world.
- Knowledge, or practical wisdom, is essential for success because a Christian must know how to apply the Word of God to his own life. One who is able to do this will be able to face any of life's decisions with confidence.
- Self-control is another one of those characteristics that is essential to success because one who lacks it will not be able to stand in times of trouble. One failure can destroy many years of faithful labor, so the successful Christian must possess self-control in order to avoid the snares of anger and lust.
- Perseverance is necessary for success because only those who endure to the end will be saved. Even as Paul feared being disqualified from the race, so the Christian must be aware of his own need to continue and not give up.

- Godliness, or reverence, is essential to success because it keeps the Christian close to his Lord. It also produces an attitude of humility, and pride is the great enemy of sanctification.
- Brotherly kindness or affection is necessary for success because the Christian cannot succeed alone. Others depend upon him, and he depends upon others. In addition, the bond between Christian brothers and sisters is a tremendous testimony to the unsaved world.
- Love is necessary for success because it is the essence of Christlikeness. Selflessness is not natural, but it is needed in order to live in a Christian manner.

### SUCCESSFUL LIVING REQUIRES GROWTH

Peter also makes the point in verse 8 that sanctification is not a once-for-all event in the Christian's life. One should not expect to reach a plateau of attainment with regard to any of the qualities Peter lists. Not until we get to heaven will we possess these qualities in perfection. The Christian must therefore continue to strive to improve in each of these areas. The Christian life leaves no room for complacency. The person who stops striving to improve will inevitably slide backward in his Christian life, and this is hardly the formula for success.

Explain to your class that every decision a person makes is either one of obedience or disobedience, either one that glorifies God or one that shames Him. With each decision of obedience, the Christian progresses in character development and gains success in his life. With each disobedient decision, he moves farther from the Lord and courts failure and frustration. Thus there really is no such thing as living on a plateau for a Christian. He is either growing or slipping backward. Success is only found on the path of obedience, and it is obedience to God's Word that develops the traits we have been studying. [An example of this would be the bumper sticker that was popular years ago: "If God feels far away, guess who moved!"]

### SUCCESSFUL LIVING PRODUCES ASSURANCE

In verse 10, Peter moves on to tell his readers that possession of these character traits in increasing measure assures a Christian of his status in the family of God. Ask your students why this is the case. They should realize that, since none of these traits is natural, they must come from the Spirit of God. And if they come from the Spirit of God, one who possesses them may be confident that the Spirit of God is within him. Furthermore, one who continues to grow in the exercise of these qualities may have confidence in the present as well as the past work of the Holy Spirit within him.

In simple terms, the Holy Spirit produces assurance of salvation by duplicating the character of Christ in those within whom He dwells. Too many people attempt to derive assurance of salvation from a past experience. The teaching of Scripture is that the present work of the Spirit produces assurance. While true faith may never be lost and one who belongs to God is His child for all eternity, assurance may indeed be lost because it is rooted in present sanctification rather than permanent status. On a number of occasions we have turned to the writing of the apostle John in his first epistle. The entire point of that epistle, he tells us, is that his readers may know that they are children of God. But in order to convince them of that, he points not to a past experience, but to the

present work of God in their lives - their obedience to the commands of God and their love for one another.

## SUCCESSFUL LIVING LEADS TO HEAVEN

In the same way that justification leads inevitably to sanctification, sanctification leads inevitably to glorification. That which God has begun, He has promised He will complete (Philippians 1:6). When a person trusts Christ for his salvation, God declares him to be righteous (justification). God then sends the Holy Spirit into that person's life in order to make him what He has already declared him to be - a righteous person. This is the process of sanctification. Unfortunately, this process, while moving continually forward as a person grows in the faith, is never completed in this life. It reaches the point of completion when the believer enters the presence of God in heaven and leaves behind all sin and weakness. This is the state of glorification, and only then will the process Peter has described reach its culmination, as he tells us in verse eleven.

Thus the Christian should pursue the qualities Peter has outlined in II Peter 1:5-7. He should never be satisfied with his level of attainment, but should also avoid frustration because of his continuing weakness and failure. Those who belong to Christ have before them the promise that they will be like Him some day, and then they will know the real meaning of the word *success*.