

LESSON 5

Virtue

“add to your faith virtue”

Peter has referred to *“things that pertain to life and godliness”* (2 Peter 1:3) in the knowledge of Jesus. These *“things”* applied amount to participation in the divine nature (cf. 2 Peter 1:4). Peter later explains, *“For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge [epignōsis; cf. 2 Peter 1:2-3] of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (2 Peter 1:8). The *“things”* in context are the seven additions to our faith according to the Spirit’s instruction by Peter (cf. 2 Peter 1:5-7).

Out of these seven, *“virtue”* is perhaps the most difficult to settle on a precise definition. A significant factor in understanding Peter’s use of *“virtue”* is in understanding the nature of his list. Opinions differ on this as well, but this writer is convinced the list has an ascending nature, beginning with *“virtue,”* and scaling the divine mountain to the summit of *“love.”*

THE LIST HAS AN ASCENDING NATURE, BEGINNING WITH VIRTUE, AND SCALING THE DIVINE MOUNTAIN TO THE SUMMIT OF LOVE.

Starting with *“virtue”* added to *“faith,”* each thing is connected to its predecessor by the phrase, *ἐν (en) δὲ (de) τῇ (ho)*. *ἐν (en)* is used in the sense of *“in connection with.”* Young’s Literal Translation gives the sense, *“superadd in your faith the worthiness, and in the worthiness the knowledge, and in the knowledge the temperance, and in the temperance the endurance, and in the endurance the piety, and in the piety the brotherly kindness, and in the brotherly kindness the love”* (2 Peter 1:5-7). Therefore, in connection with *“faith”* one is to add *“virtue;”* in connection with *“virtue,”* one is to add *“knowledge;”* etc. Each succeeding *“thing”* is added to the previous, manifesting in the very language a relationship to each other. This relationship is marked by progress in the context.

Peter’s instruction for growth in grace has as its goal being *“partakers of the divine nature”* (2 Peter 1:4). This fellowship is enjoyed through the participant knowledge of Jesus. The all-encompassing description of God revealed in the Man Jesus is *agapē*. As John wrote, *“God is love [agapē]”* (1 John 4:8). The last *“thing”* Peter instructs us to add is *“love [agapē].”* Thus, the thought, becoming *“partakers of the divine nature”* (2 Peter 1:4). This in no way limits us to mastering one thing before adding the next. We must add them all with diligence – in haste. However, the logical progression grants powerful insight into the very concept of spiritual growth.

VIRTUE (ARETE) DEFINED

- “(1) a virtuous course of thought, feeling and action; (1a) virtue, moral goodness; (2) any particular moral excellence, as modesty, purity” (THAYER)
- “properly denotes whatever procures preeminent estimation for a person or thing; hence, ‘intrinsic eminence, moral goodness, virtue,’” (VINE)
- “uncommon character worthy of praise, excellence of character, exceptional civic virtue” (BDAG)
- “properly, manliness (valor), i.e. excellence (intrinsic or attributed)” (STRONG)

Each of the above definitions manifests the broadness of the term *aretē*. Thayer’s second entry especially highlights the difficulty in settling on a specific definition for our text (cf. 2 Peter 1:5). Everything Peter instructs to be added to faith fits the description of “any particular moral excellence.” For this reason, many refer to Peter’s list as “Christian virtues.” However, it seems redundant at best for Peter to utilize “virtue” in this sense as one of the virtues to be added to faith. Consequently, many settle on a common usage of *aretē* in koine Greek language. Arndt and Gingrich (BDAG) comment, “In Homer primarily of military valor or exploits.” No doubt, valor, manliness, and courage are imperative to growing in grace, and Christian living. However, it is not necessary to limit Peter’s use of *aretē* to this meaning. Understanding the Bible use of *aretē* is helpful.

VIRTUE (ARETE) IN THE NEW TESTAMENT (5X)

- Philippians 4:8 (“*virtue*”) – It is used here in the general sense. Meditation on anything that is of moral excellence is encouraged.
- 1 Peter 2:9 (“*praises*”) – It is used here in reference to the things of God that are praiseworthy. This includes things pertaining to God’s excellence.
- 2 Peter 1:3 (“*virtue*”) – It is used here in reference to the excellence of Christ’s character displayed in His fleshly dwelling. (See Lesson 2, “*Grace Multiplied Through the Knowledge of Jesus*”)
- 2 Peter 1:5 (“*virtue*”) (2x) – The text under consideration.

The New Testament never uses *aretē* in the limited, specific sense of courage or valor. This is not to suggest the idea is especially foreign to the context at hand, however, it seems to be used more broadly. In fact, there is not a reason apparent to this writer for limiting it to any narrow sense. It seems the general sense of “*moral excellence*” (NASB) and the specific sense of courage and valor could be used in tandem.

As discussed in previous lessons, the focus of the context is growth in God’s grace, namely, being “*partakers of the divine nature*” (2 Peter 1:4). This nature is displayed in the life of Christ, and we come to partake in it through “*knowledge of Him*” (2 Peter 1:3). Specifically, He “*called*

us **by** His own glory and excellence (*aretē*)” (NASB) “**to** his own glory and excellence (*aretē*)” (ESV). *Aretē* is used in this verse in reference to the entirety of Christ’s character. Our goal is to be like Christ in all that He displayed in His life. This is Peter’s whole focus, and it fits his disapproval of those who profess to be Christians, though they live lives of immoral excess (cf. 2 Peter 2:18-22). They are those who have “*forgotten that [they were] cleansed from [their] old sins*” (2 Peter 1:9). It would be logical for Peter to begin with the general sense of “*virtue*” as a goal added to initial faith. However, in the face of false teachers and their error of libertinism, courage and valor would be a necessary virtue from which the others would have to emanate. Thus, Peter is instructing the brethren to add **the goal of moral excellence** (Christ-likeness) to their faith, and the **courage** that reaching such a goal would require.

THE GOAL OF PARTAKING IN THE VIRTUE OF CHRIST

CHRIST CALLED US TO HIS OWN GLORY AND EXCELLENCE. HE DID NOT CALL US TO A LIFE OF MEDIOCRITY.

Christ called us “*to his own glory and excellence*” (2 Peter 1:3, ESV). He did not call us to a life of mediocrity. As has been discussed throughout this series of studies, many hold a view of God’s grace which caters to complacency, and a lax attitude toward spiritual growth; but being a Christian is not about coasting our way to heaven because not much is expected of us. A Christian is one who is seeking to imitate Christ.

Paul told the Corinthians, “*Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ*” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Similarly, he called the Ephesians to be “*imitators of God as dear children*” (Ephesians 5:1). Imitation of Christ inheres in the term, “*Christian*.” Names have meanings, and we would do well to understand the name we wear. Luke records, “*And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch*” (Acts 11:26). “*Disciples*” is a translation of the Greek, *mathētēs*. BDAG defines the word, “one who is rather constantly associated with someone who has a pedagogical reputation or a particular set of views, disciple, adherent.” Vine explains, “A ‘disciple’ was not only a pupil, but an adherent; hence they are spoken of as imitators of their teacher.” Hellenists in Antioch were converted to Christ through the preaching of His gospel. The church in Jerusalem heard of this, and sent Barnabas to encourage the brethren, and help them grow through further teaching. When he arrived, he saw the drastic transformation that had taken place by God’s grace as they served the Lord in accordance with His word (cf. Acts 11:23). They had turned from the darkness of sin and began imitating Christ – they were His disciples. Then God gave the disciples a new name (“*called,*” *chrēmatisō*, “to utter an oracle, i.e. divinely intimate, STRONG), “*Christians*.” *Christianos*, “‘Christian,’ a word formed after the Roman style, signifying an adherent of Jesus” (VINE).

Christ’s call to discipleship was a strongly worded challenge, “*Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me*” (Mark 8:34). Our goal is to follow Him exactly. This requires taking up the obligation of God’s will, and the shame and suffering which come with it. The cross we are to bear will be left on the ground unless we are willing to deny ourselves, leaving room for Christ to dwell in us (cf. Galatians 2:20). The bar is set high for us, and our goal is to ever strive to be like Him (cf. 1 John 1:7; 2:1, 6, 15; 3:3, 16-18).

THE NEED FOR COURAGE

The concept of courage and valor in *aretē* is appropriate, as the blessing of partaking of the divine nature also comes with adversity. If we are to imitate Jesus in all that He did, we must not be surprised by the opposition we will face in the process (cf. 1 Peter 4:12-13).

Following and imitating Jesus means we will be different. Jesus challenged the status quo. The scribes and Pharisees opposed His ways as they conflicted with their erroneous view of the Law. They sneered at His presence among the tax collectors and sinners (cf. Mark 2:13-17). He was derided for refusing to bend to the ungodly binding of traditions (cf. Matthew 15:1-9). Likewise, as we imitate Christ others will think it strange (cf. 1 Peter 4:3-4).

Being a Christian means we will be challenged. Jesus had a target on His back because of His devotion to God. He was bombarded with insidious questions meant to trap and indict Him (cf. Matthew 21:23; 22:15-40). We, too, will be faced with questions meant to undercut our faith, and discredit the truth. We must be ready with an answer in the fear of God (cf. 1 Peter 3:15).

IF WE WISH TO GROW IN GOD'S GRACE, WE MUST UNDERSTAND THE BLESSING COMES WITH IMMENSE CHALLENGE. YET, AS MUCH CHALLENGE THAT PARTICIPATING IN THE THINGS OF GOD BRINGS, GOD SUPPLIES US WITH THE GRACE SUFFICIENT TO WITHSTAND.

Adhering to the way of Christ means we subscribe to pointed hatred by those in the world. From early in His ministry to the bitter end, Jesus was the object of conspiracy (cf. Luke 6:11; 19:47-48; 22:2; John 5:16; 11:53). He was hated vehemently and assured the disciples they would face the same (cf. John 15:18-20). Disciples of Christ can expect persecution (cf. 2 Timothy 3:12; John 3:20; Ephesians 5:8).

If we wish to grow in God's grace, we must understand the blessing comes with immense challenge. Yet, as much challenge that participating in the things of God brings, God supplies us with the grace sufficient to withstand (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10). We must add bravery to our faith (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:13). We must be strong and courageous (cf. Joshua 1:6-9).

LESSON 5 QUESTIONS

1. Is there any pattern to Peter's list of virtues (cf. 2 Peter 1:5-7)?
2. What phrase connects each virtue to the previous? What does it indicate?
3. What connection, if any, is there to the last thing Peter instructs us to add ("*love*"), and the goal of being "*partakers of the divine nature*?"
4. What does "*virtue*" mean? Is there any narrow use of the term that is notable?
5. *Aretē* is used three other times in the New Testament in addition to the verse in question (cf. Philippians 4:8; 1 Peter 2:9; 2 Peter 1:3). Look at each in context and explain how it is used.
6. In what way does Peter use "*virtue*" as the first thing in his instructed list? What in the context of 2 Peter might lead one to this conclusion?
7. What, or who, is the standard of imitation Christians are called to?
8. Explain the context in which the name "*Christian*" first appears in scripture (cf. Acts 11:26). What does "*Christian*" mean? What does it mean practically?
9. Why is the concept of courage within the term "*virtue*" important as one of the first things we add to our faith?

