

2 Peter 1:3-11

Christian Virtues Series: Self-Control

“What Does the World Need Now?”

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Rev. Lou Nyiri

While best known for her authorship of the novels, Little Women and their sequels Little Men and Jo's Boys, The American novelist and short story writer, Louisa May Alcott, also penned poetic wisdom with such works as, the following:

My Kingdom

A little kingdom I possess
where thoughts and feelings dwell,
And very hard I find the task
of governing it well;
For passion tempts and troubles me,
A wayward will misleads,
And selfishness its shadow casts
On all my words and deeds.

How can I learn to rule myself,
to be the child I should,
Honest and brave, nor ever tire
Of trying to be good?
How can I keep a sunny soul
To shine along life's way?
How can I tune my little heart
To sweetly sing all day?

Dear Father, help me with the love
that casteth out my fear;
Teach me to lean on thee, and feel
That thou art very near,
That no temptation is unseen
No childish grief too small,
Since thou, with patience infinite,
Doth soothe and comfort all.

I do not ask for any crown
But that which all may win
Nor seek to conquer any world
Except the one within.
Be thou my guide until I find,

Led by a tender hand,
Thy happy kingdom in myself
And dare to take command.

Stanzas 1 & 4 help us to see a little clearer what this whole virtue thing is all about:

*A little kingdom I possess
where thoughts and feelings dwell,
And very hard I find the task
of governing it well; ...
I do not ask for any crown
But that which all may win
Nor seek to conquer any world
Except the one within.*

“The focus,” as one blogger writes about this poem, “remains on the personal endeavor of the speaker suggesting that her pursuit of grace is a reflection of her own strength of character rather than the cleanliness of her soul.”

The blogger continues, “She asks ‘*How can I rule myself?*’ first and foremost before she seeks divine inspiration, ‘*Dear Father, help me with the love that casteth out my fear.*’ There is no selfishness, as she fears in the first verse, but a fortitude not to seek the worldly glory that comes with a crown, but rather to find a sense of inner peace, the ‘happy kingdom’ within.”¹

So, which is it, faith leads to virtue / virtue leads to faith / a generous mix of both / or something completely different?

Enter, 2 Peter, a piece written so as to remind its audience the churches tradition. It does so via its format – it is called an *exordium* (an introduction establishing a common ground with its audience and its reason for being written) – this particular piece in 2 Peter 1:3-11 is a miniature homily which presents the essence of apostolic preaching...and it does so in a very standard homiletical pattern found in Jewish and early Christian literature.

First, there is a historical and theological section reiterating God’s salvific acts in history (1:3-4). Second, there are ethical exhortations which anticipate what is forthcoming (1:5-10). Third & final, there is an end-time (eschatological) section that either promises or threatens judgement (1:11).

So, let’s quickly talk about those three items:

1. It is through Christ’s power – a power he shares with God – that Christians have everything needed to live a godly life. Which prompts us to wonder – *what does Godliness look like?*

¹ <https://blog.thereader.org.uk/2016/04/11/featured-poem-my-kingdom-by-louisa-may-alcott/>

Godliness – *Eusebia* – means having the proper attitude of piety toward God, expressed in obedience to God’s will and walking according to God’s moral standards.

The gift of possessing everything necessary for a godly life comes with the personal knowledge of Jesus the Christ, which one obtains at conversion (that time when we declare that Jesus is the person we want to take our cues from...it kind of goes along with the name *Christ follower*).

This knowledge of Jesus is both central for and subsequently derived from conversion. It forms the basis of one’s Christian growth, enabling the Christian to escape the world’s defilement. As one lives like a Christ-follower, one also becomes a Christ-follower.

A mark, therefore, of Christian maturity, is confirmation that our call by Jesus is both gift and grind – it is both something we receive and something we work at (daily).

2. Which leads to our second point: The benefits afforded Christians by divine power through the knowledge of Christ enable the Christ-follower to live into what it means to be called by Christ...this is where we get into the lists of vices and virtues among New Testament writers who shared such lists for exhortation and instruction.

Here, as in other places, 2 Peter sets them forth as figures of speech in which a word is repeated before passing on to the next. Better still, such lists lay out the virtues that characterize the Christian life, ***beginning with faith and ending with love.***

Each virtue is supported by that which precedes.

Faith, being first, ground all the virtues.

The knowledge of Christ, which is gained through the gift of faith, provides all that is necessary for a godly life (1:3).

Love, which is the chief virtue in such lists of Christian virtues, concludes the list, which implies that ***love*** ultimately includes all the other virtues as well...[*think faith, hope and love – but the greatest of these is love of 1 Corinthians 13:13 fame*].

So, what I take from this is the following, we keep practicing the virtues so that eventually our virtuous virtuosity becomes more-and-more Christ-like - & it is most Christ-like when we are doing so with the penultimate reason behind our actions being love – when we are sincerely or authentically following Christ – we are acting in such ways that unconditional love – love for the common and greater good – is the reason behind our actions...

Now, if you’re already jumping to the “loop-hole” in this logic and thinking, *Well, if I’m not doing it for the right reason, then I’ll just stop doing the right thing.* In the words of Jeopardy, **[buzzer sound]**, incorrect – when it comes to virtuous living, as modern parlance might put it, it’s okay to *fake it until you make it* – keep doing the virtuous thing and eventually the right motivation will follow – and it will get easier to do the right thing the more you do the right thing.

Which brings us to today' virtue: Self-Control.

The way, 2 Peter lays it out is as follows:

- Support your faith with goodness – arete – virtue – moral excellence – this is what the Christ-follower is called to.
- Goodness is supported by knowledge – gnosis – the knowledge of Christ which is gradually acquired throughout the Christ-follower's walk.
- Knowledge with self-control – egkrateia – restraint from the excesses of desires (physical or other) which can lead to worldly corruption. To exercise self-control is to resist the teaching that says 'more is better' or 'the one with the most gold gets to make the rules' or as the popular sitcom "Parks and Rec" made popular to live in such a way that every day is a 'treat yo' self' kind of day where you throw caution to the wind and give into every indulgence money can buy **[9:00 a.m. contemporary – show clip]**.
- Self-control is supported by endurance – perseverance – hypomone – the continuation in right thinking and practice despite temptation, suffering or evil – this endurance relies and trusts in God to fulfill God's promises – it is as Eugene Peterson made popular in his book on the Psalms living with a long obedience in the same direction.
- Endurance is supported by godliness – Eusebia – which is basically an attitude of honoring God, acknowledging God's authority in one's life, and seeking to obey God's will.
- Godliness gives way to mutual affection – Philadelphia – you know it as the home of Bryce Harper – for mutual affection literally translates "brotherly [or sisterly/sibling] kindness" – it is the affection for other Christ-followers as siblings in Christ.

And so, what exactly are we to do with self-control...

Well, first let's revisit the word itself:

Egkrateia (eng-khra'-ti-a) – it is comprised of two root words: en = infuse with or by & kratos = vigor, dominion, power, strength.

To have egkrateia is to have a great might and force – to have a strong will which is firmly held in check.

Presbyterian minister, Lloyd John Ogilvie, who died just last month and who served as Chaplain of the United States Senate from 104th through 107th Congresses, wrote the following regarding self-control:

"Self-control, the last fruit of the Spirit, is the one that makes all the rest operative. To the Greek, this meant to have "power over oneself." Paul grasped this quality from the Stoics and claimed it as one of the imputed vibrancies of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word means to have strength to control the self. We know this is not possible until we surrender to Christ's management."

Ogilvie continues, "This sublime fruit of the Spirit is not negative. It doesn't delineate what we are against or will not do. Rather, it consists of a very positive capacity to know who we are and

what we will do because the Spirit is in control of our abilities and aptitudes, as well as our appetites. We can have power over ourselves only when we have submitted to the Spirit's control and power in us. Christ's control is the basis of self-control."

I appreciate what Ogilvie likens it to, when he writes, "The fruit of Christ's indwelling is more than just not flying off the handle or [being perfect.] Instead, it's being centered so that all our energies, when multiplied by the Spirit, can be used creatively rather than squandered. A person who has the fruit of self-control becomes like a wind channel in which the [wind's] power is [harnessed and] it's silent strength focused to do what the Master commands."²

The support of faith with such virtues keeps Christ-followers from becoming ineffective and unfruitful. To lose sight of our knowledge of Christ and what Christ calls us to results in aimless wandering – yet, to lean into and harness the strength and power of God's Holy Spirit opens us up to becoming who it is God knows us to be and who it is God needs us to be in this world - recall those words from Jesus about being salt and light in distasteful, dark times (Matthew 5:13-16) – when we live in such a way, we confirm the call and election of which 2 Peter declares.

As we make the effort and mature in our walk as Christ-followers, we ultimately confirm our call and election – which are synonymous for Christ's summons of the Christian to repent (turn from old ways of seeing and being), to be saved (to realize we cannot do it on our own and need assistance along the way), to serve God in accomplishing God's purposes and to enter such a mission field recognizing that Christ has not only called us – Christ has also given us what we need in order to live a godly life -

Faith to Goodness...
Goodness with Knowledge...
Knowledge with Self-Control...
Self-Control with Endurance...
Endurance with godliness...
Godliness with mutual affection...
Mutual affection with love...

This leads to effectively fruitful ministries and lives.

Perhaps most importantly, Christ accompanies us along the way (remember I am with you always...even to the close of the age – Matthew 28:20).

And isn't that something the world needs now...and...always!

Amen and Amen.

² God's Treasury of Virtues: An Inspirational Collection of Stories, Quotes, Hymns, Scriptures and Poems, (Honor Books, Inc., Tulsa, OK, 1995) p. 416.