

Dear Friends,

Much of Scripture's writing and background occurred in an agricultural setting. Jesus used mostly agricultural symbols in His parables. In our study passage, Peter follows that pattern. After teaching us how to grow our faith and make it fruitful, Peter takes us back to the agricultural background. Shall we be "barren and unfruitful" in our knowledge of the Lord, or shall we bear good fruit?

What does it mean for a believer in Jesus to neglect his/her faith and become barren and unfruitful? Many Bible teachers would profit from a few days on a farm before reading and interpreting the Scriptures. For a farmer to suffer bad weather which results in a poor crop is regrettable. However, for the farmer to consciously neglect his farm and produce little or no fruit is inexcusable.

We should not--ever--minimize the problem of an unfruitful faith. Jesus didn't. Peter didn't. However, we should carefully follow Scripture's revelation regarding the dire consequences of such neglect. Too many modern Bible teachers who need more knowledge of farming for their Bible study often warn their congregation, "If you don't bear this fruit, I can't tell you if you even own a farm or not. I don't know if you are saved or not." First, Peter never warns his readers, including us, that failure to produce a fruitful faith means they are not saved. The revealed warning is quite sufficient in itself. We need not exaggerate and misrepresent it. I fear that I have known a few believers who allowed this world and its alluring entertainments to prevent their growing a fruitful faith. Some professed to me that they doubted their faith was ever real at all. Some simply said their faith didn't matter to them anymore. What does Peter teach us regarding this unfruitful faith kind of person? They are blind. They have eyes, a sense of vision, but they have lost their focus. Then can't see clearly beyond the short distance of their current indulgent sinful appetite. Or worse still, they may have forgotten that they were saved from their sins. No, Peter didn't teach that they lost their salvation. Nor did he teach that they "Never really were saved at all." He teaches us that they forgot that they were purged from their sins.

Rather than chasing imaginary windmills of our own sinful appetites, let's study what the Holy Spirit directed Peter to write. We cannot question or doubt that He taught Peter to emphasize that faith must be cultivated and nurtured in our minds and in our conduct to grow spiritual fruit and blessing to maturity. Faith can't grow in ignorance, so Peter links this fruitful faith to a rich and pervasive "...knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue." Fruitful, God honoring and believer-blessing faith never grows in ignorance of God and His truth. Nor does it grow apart from "virtue," personal ethical integrity, not personal self-first indulgence.

At its heart, faith means we know something significant about God, and we have found from that knowledge that our God is trustworthy and gracious. We have much to learn about Biblical faith, and about the culture of soul necessary for us to grow it into a fruitful faith.

Lord bless,
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The Fruitful Faith Formula

And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. (2 Peter 1:5-9 KJV 1900)

Peter tightly and logically links these verses to his introduction. As born-again children of God, the Lord has given us full access to "...all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue." (2 Peter 1:3 KJV) Our access to these blessings is contingent on our gaining knowledge of God and spiritual things from His Book as our exclusive "Textbook" in our pursuit of godliness and faith. However, Peter reminds us at the beginning of our study verses that knowledge alone cannot secure all these blessings. "And beside this..." Beside our "knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue," Peter teaches us to "give all diligence," to work faithfully and intently to nurture and grow seven qualities in our lifestyle. It is only by these additions to our God given faith that we become fruitful and realize the treasure of "all thing that pertain unto life and godliness." Underscore the opposite to Peter's teaching, "And without this," what happens? He tells us in the closing verses of our study. We become barren, unfruitful, so much so that we are liable to forget that the Lord saved us. We don't lose our salvation, but we can lose our knowledge of it and the temporal blessings that accompany it.

"...add to your faith." God given faith serves as the bedrock foundation for the spiritually fruitful and blessed life. I fear that too many very sincere Christian folks think of faith as some kind of mystical quality that connects them to God. Neither the word itself nor Scripture's teaching about the quality of faith allow that idea. At the heart of the word, faith defines one's respect, confidence, and trust in someone whom they have grown to know to be trustworthy. That person has consistently proved their character so that you can rely on him in every circumstance. I spent my secular career in the business world. In that setting, I encountered several people who were eager to tell you they were a Christian. Some of them would even insist on prayer before a business luncheon. However, I was disappointed to observe that many of these same people forgot or ignored their Christian profession in their actual business dealings. These people did not understand or know Peter's teaching in our study lesson. Their conduct indicated that they trusted far more in their own deceitful skill than in God and His ethics-in-the-trenches of everyday life, including how they conducted their business.

“...add to your faith.” Our first charge as children of God is to learn from God (He is the teacher) and about our God and His character. No textbook, no teacher, and no philosophy can substitute for the Book God has given to us. The more we immerse our minds in Biblical teaching about the holy, gracious, and reliable character of our God the more we equip ourselves to grow in our faith, to become fruitful and blessed, not unfruitful and forgetful of our blessings. We learn the true gracious, trustworthy, reliable character of God in Scripture more than any other single resource. Scripture teaches us even to trust this “Rule of faith,” Scripture, above our own experience. The trustworthy character of God which we learn in Scripture appears in Peter’s words and frames the basic premise of Biblical, godly faith.

But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy. (1 Peter 1:15-16 KJV)

Our lifestyle, our conduct in the trenches of our business dealings, as well as our conversation and conduct with family and our fellow-citizens in the faith, is to imitate our “Father” whose character always proves Himself holy, righteous, and trustworthy, wholly deserving of our “Faith” in Him. It is in this “Faith” which Peter teaches us to grow by adding those seven qualities to it. Our ethics, our moral character, not just our words, are to emulate His. If a Christian wishes to pray before lunch with other businesspeople, God bless them. However, after you pray, be doubly sure your business ethics in dealing with those people fully exemplifies the noble integrity of your God.

What are these qualities which Peter teaches us to add to our faith? We need to linger with each trait. We need to know what it is, what it means, so we can integrate it wholly into our conduct and character.

1. “Virtue.” Kittel defines the word translated “virtue” in this verse as “...the excellence that the righteous are to maintain in life and death.” (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Abridged-Little Kittel)) Louw-Nida’s definition is similar, “a manifestation of power characterized by excellence.” Combining these two definitions, we learn that this word teaches us to approach our choices and conduct with both power and moral excellence. Avoid shady or “Borderline” conduct. This trait rejects any claim of being a helpless victim of other people or of circumstances. By living under the canopy of the Lord’s grace toward us, Peter teaches us to mirror that grace to those around us. “Walk” by faith and use that position and its inherent power in our conduct. Claim your integrity. Live it. Live it in the image and example of Jesus, thought, word, and deed. Peter built this letter and lesson on our knowledge of the Lord. However, knowledge without this related “Virtue” is empty, a sham. The devil knows Scripture better than most of us, but his utter lack of virtue appears in his deceitful use and abuse of its meaning and ethic. A fruitful faith requires us to imitate Jesus’ faith and integrity in knowledge and virtue, not imitate Satan who knows but refuses integrity.

2. "...to virtue knowledge." Peter started this letter and lesson with knowledge, so why repeat it here? If we follow the teaching of Scripture, we need multiple facets of knowledge to grow strong and healthy in our faith. The foundational premise is our knowledge of the trustworthiness of our God based on the witness of Scripture.

Following our thorough knowledge of God from Scripture, we need to grow in our personal experience of God, specifically with the insight that our experience of God always affirms what Scripture reveals about Him. Peter affirms this experience.

As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: If so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious. (1 Peter 2:2-3 KJV)

You can only "Know" the taste of ice cream by the experience of tasting it. If we try to experience God apart from a strong foundational knowledge of Him from Scripture, we are liable to err in our thinking.

I offer one additional facet of knowledge that we need to gain in pursuing a fruitful faith.

That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death. (Philippians 3:10 KJV)

Paul had a masterful knowledge of Scripture. In this longing, he sought a different kind of knowledge. "That I may know him..." Paul discounted all his personal achievements which he gained prior to Damascus Road. He didn't long for another college degree or award. His present pursuit centered on growing to "Know" Jesus in the trenches of his life. To "Know" Him and His power when life's greatest trials crushed in upon him. To "Know" Him through personal experience which transformed the image of Paul the man into Paul the follower and worshipper of Jesus. We, too, need this knowledge-by-experience to grow into a fruitful faith.

3. "And to knowledge temperance." "Temperance" at its heart means self-control. Someone who has a problem with alcohol or drugs is "Temperate" when they use their self-control to avoid their problem substance. Because of the residual influence of our sinful nature, each of us has a "problem substance," sin. It haunts us, teases us, and entices us to break down our self-control and indulge it. Peter's including of this quality in his list of fruitful faith requirements is wise and necessary. Far too many professing believers think knowing "The truth" from their perspective makes them a superior believer. How do they conduct their life? Often borderline at best. Peter disagrees. Yes, knowledge is essential to a fruitful faith, knowledge of God that we gain through Scripture and, always in harmony with Scripture, and the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, also always in harmony with the "Book" He gave us. However, if we fail to control our tongue and our conduct, all the knowledge available cannot compensate for our lack of self-control. In addition to controlling our sinful inclinations, "Temperance" equally cautions us to guard against being excessively—pretentiously—righteous, which is "Too good to be true" righteous. Solomon touched on both problems.

Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself? Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time? (Ecclesiastes 7:16-17 KJV)

According to Solomon, being over much righteous destroys us, our faith, and our faithful testimony. If we fall into this devious snare of our adversary, we have no one to blame but self. We do it to ourselves. Regardless of the issue, Biblical and fruitful faith avoids comparing ourselves with others and claiming superiority. “I could have done that far better than he did it.” Likewise, the opposite error, ignoring God and His moral commandments, brings us squarely under His judgment and the danger of “Dying before our time.” Ah, this thing Peter calls “Temperance” is important, isn’t it?

4. “...to temperance patience.” One of my favorite New Testament Greek dictionaries defines the word translated “patience” in this verse as the capacity to “...bear up under difficult circumstances.” Oh, how easy it is for us to react to unpleasant things in our life with sharp and immediate indignation. “How dare you....” Here perhaps more than in most of our Christian ethical challenge we need to remember Jesus’ example. Peter reminds us.

Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed *himself* to him that judgeth righteously. (1 Peter 2:23 KJV)

When wick men spoke harsh, hateful words to—and about—Jesus, how did He react? Godly wisdom—godly fruitful faith—respectfully follows His example.

5. “...to patience godliness.” What is “Godliness”? We often read about it in Scripture, but what is it? A simple working definition might be appropriate beliefs and actions relative to our fellowship with the Lord. Scripture never defines “Godliness” by what you or I think, but by God and His revealed-in-Scripture faith and demeanor. James teaches us to be doubly sure that our profession of faith is accompanied by conduct, “works,” that affirm that profession of faith.

Two traits remain in Peter’s list, in addition to his teaching regarding the purpose and value of a fruitful faith in a believer’s life. Lord willing, we’ll continue our study of these thoughts next week.

Elder Joe Holder