

Sermon 1, The Ecumenical Knowledge of Christ, 2 Peter 1:1-2, 1:15-2:9, 3:14-18

Proposition: Peter's second letter pulls together every part of the canon by focusing on the need all Christians have to grow in the knowledge of Christ.

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- II. Peter's Canonical Ecumenicity, select
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we begin this morning to look together at the second letter of Peter to Christians everywhere. This letter is one of the seven Catholic epistles directed to the whole church — and this morning we're going to look at its main points. We're looking at this letter because it tells us what every Christian needs to know — how to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ. This is what you need to do, what I need to do, what Peter in his mature apostolic wisdom calls on Christians everywhere to do. I've said it before and I'll say it again: Christianity is not a religion but a relationship. Christianity is about knowing Christ, and that is exactly how Peter defined it at the end of his life. We will see today that his letter pulls together every part of the canon of Scripture to teach the truth that all Christians need to grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Knowing Christ, through His word: That is the message Peter has for us today.

I. Peter's Frame: Grace in the Knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, 1:2, 3:18

The first thing I want to point out to you this morning is the frame around the letter. Peter begins and ends with the same phrase: "Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord," (2Pe 1:2 NKJ) and then "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2Pe 3:18 NKJ). As we have talked about, the repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning and end of a document or a section of a document implies that

everything between those two phrases is concerned with the theme they identify. Joseph Conrad, if you recall, uses this technique in his famous novella *Heart of Darkness*, which uses the word “darkness” at both the beginning and end of the book to emphasize that what’s in between is a story of the darkness in the heart of Africa and in the heart of man. Well, Peter, thankfully, is not going to focus on the theme of darkness but rather on the theme of growth in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

What does it mean to grow in grace? It means to get more grace — that is, to experience and receive a larger measure of God’s favor. It means to experience the created effect of the Holy Spirit’s presence within you. It means a greater ability to obey God, to love and desire what He wants you to love and desire. Other things being equal, the more grace you have the more you look like Jesus, who was full of grace and truth. Peter is writing to help us grow in grace. He wants us, his readers, to experience more of God’s favor and express our experience of it by how we live. But grace is not the sum total of what Peter wants for his readers. His biggest theme is the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

What is the knowledge of Christ? Well, it’s a personal, relational reality. It means knowing a person. We can know many different things, and knowing a person involves something of propositional knowledge and something of knowing how to be a friend. But knowing a person is bigger than propositional knowledge or friendly knowledge. Knowing a person is what we were created for. As human beings, our defining feature that sets us apart from the other animals is our intellect. We can *know*. And this creative feature, this gift that God gave us that makes us uniquely superior to the other animals, has a supremely religious function. We are supposed to use our intellect to know Jesus Christ, who is our God, our Lord, our Master, and our Savior.

That, after all, is the central Christian claim: We know Christ, who is God. Jesus is my Lord. Jesus is my Savior. The Anointed Messiah of God is my Master whom I serve. And of course, to say those things is to say that you know enough about Jesus to know what He wants. It’s to say that you know Jesus well enough to be His servant. It is a claim that God has revealed Himself in Jesus of Nazareth, and that Jesus lives now and is knowable now.

What would you think of a claim to know and serve one of Jesus’ human contemporaries? If someone said to you, “I serve the Emperor Tiberius!” or “I serve Quirinius the governor of Roman Syria,” you would raise your eyebrows, politely demur, and hurry away as fast as possible. I can’t say that I want to spend much time with someone who has dedicated his life to serving Tiberius Caesar. But according to the New Testament, to be a Christian is to personally know and serve Jesus of Nazareth who is not just of Nazareth but is also the Lord from Heaven.

So the question immediately arises: By what means do we get to know a man who does not live on earth but is in Heaven at the right hand of the Father? How do we actually grow in the knowledge of Christ when we can hardly take Him out to lunch or have Him over for dinner? The answer, my friends, is found in Peter’s creation and deployment of Scripture. We know Jesus

through what is written about Him in the word of God. Peter, within the frame of growing in the knowledge of Christ, cites every part of the canon to make it clear that we come to know Christ through His word. This lamp shining in a dark place is how we grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

II. Peter's Canonical Ecumenicity, select

So look at Peter's canonical ecumenicity. Peter, as we know, had been the leader of the original twelve but was quickly overshadowed by the genius and force of Paul. To this day, various factions of a sort have formed up behind Peter and Paul, where the Roman Catholic Church claims Peter while the Reformed churches claim Paul. Yet in this letter Peter explicitly endorses Paul. A little close attention, though, shows that Peter not only looks to Paul to help guide Christians into the knowledge of Christ — he looks to the entirety of the Bible. Notice the following points.

A. Listen to the Law, 2:4-9, 15

Peter appeals to the law in ch. 2 by listing examples from Genesis and Numbers. Notice how he doesn't simply mention these figures — Noah, Lot, Balaam, Sodom, fallen angels — as examples whom his readers might be expected to know. He's depending on their historicity to make a point about the character of God. This point is that God will judge the wicked and deliver the godly, and we know this because He has done so! He delivered Lot and Noah from the judgment that fell on the ungodly people around them — but He judged Balaam and the fallen angels. Clearly, in other words, Peter is not simply mentioning these examples the way we might mention Hercules or Iron Man. He expects his readers to derive reliable knowledge of God and thus of Christ from these examples. The bottom line is that he regards the law — the first division of the Old Testament, including what we call the Pentateuch — as a source for the knowledge of Christ.

Now, that is only to be expected. The law was regarded in that day as the most reliable part of the Bible, for it was the words of Moses, the great teacher and founder of the Jewish nation. Of course Peter would appeal to the law to establish his points!

B. Listen to the Prophets, 3:2

But he doesn't stop there. Peter also appeals to the prophets. Indeed, in ch. 1 he calls the prophetic word more sure than his own eyewitness testimony. In ch. 3 he tells his readers that he wants them to be mindful of the words of the prophets. Again, based on the frame of the knowledge of Christ that surrounds the book, we can be confident that the reason he wants us to listen to the prophets is so that we can grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. The words of the prophets will teach you about Jesus, if only you will listen to them! So again, how do you grow in the knowledge of Christ? Listen to the words of Moses' law. Listen to the teachings of the prophets.

C. Listen to the Psalms, 3:8

And finally, Peter cites the third traditional division of what he would have known as the Scriptures and what we know as the Old Testament — that is, the Psalms. Remember how Jesus

invoked this threefold division of the OT? "Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me" (Luk 24:44 NKJ). Well, these are exactly the three parts of Scripture that Peter appeals to. You're saying "Wait a second. I don't see him saying "Listen to the Psalms." Ah, yes. While he doesn't *name* the psalms, he does *quotes* the psalms. Psa 90:4 reads, "For a thousand years in Thy sight Are like yesterday when it passes by, Or as a watch in the night." And how does Peter use this phrase? By telling us that a thousands years are like a single day in the sight of God. He practically quotes from the psalm, using it to prove that God will fulfill His promises in His own good time.

In other words, the Psalms have some important contributions to the knowledge of Christ to make to us. They tell us about His eternal perspective, in which a thousand years and a day are interchangeable. Do you know that about Jesus — His eternality? His transcendence of our time categories?

So listen to the law, the prophets, and the psalms, if you want to know Jesus and experience His grace.

D. Listen to the Apostles, 1:15-16

Again, though, Peter doesn't stop there. He also commends listening to the apostles, both directly in 3:2 and indirectly in ch. 1, where he tells his readers that he wants them to have a reminder of the truths he taught and includes himself in the company of the apostles who rejected myths and only taught what they personally had seen of the majesty of our Lord Jesus Christ. The point, once again, is clear: You can grow in the knowledge of Christ by listening to the apostles, who were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus. So listen to them.

The apostles, of course, are the foundation of the church. The synagogue is arguably built on the law, the prophets, and the psalms. But when you add the apostles into that mix, then you get the foundation of the church. Brothers and sisters, you and I need to learn about Jesus from the apostles!

E. Listen to the Gospels, 1:17-18

Well, Peter then goes on to allude to the story of the transfiguration, providing the bare bones of a narrative that would make no sense without the gospel accounts of how Jesus revealed his glory on a mountain to Moses, Elijah, and a select few of the apostles. This allusion is clearly just that — an allusion. It requires the gospels to make sense of it. And so, again, Peter is endorsing the gospels as a means to the knowledge of Christ. Do you want to know the Father's beloved son, the one in whom He is well pleased? Then listen to the four gospels and their accounts of all that Jesus began both to do and teach.

F. Listen to Paul's Epistles, 3:15-16

Well, finally, Peter endorses the man who confronted him to his face and called him out for legalism and hypocrisy. He speaks of Paul as a beloved brother and indicates that he has written about the Lord's salvation in all his letters. In other words, Peter wants us to know that Paul is a good source for the knowledge of Christ. Those who try to paint Peter and Paul as enemies —

and there have been and still today are many such, both on the Petrine side and the Pauline sides of the fence — disagree with Peter, who flatly says that Paul is to be regarded as a trustworthy communicator of the apostolic truth.

So how can you grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ? By listening to the whole of Scripture! Listen to the law, the prophets, and the psalms. Listen to the apostles, the gospels, and the epistles of Paul. The only book of the Bible that might not fit under these headings is Revelation, but even that one is clearly apostolic.

III. Peter's Point

Yet though Peter's canonical ecumenicity is noteworthy, it does not sum up all that he has to say. A huge part of his message, including all of ch. 2 and half of ch. 3, is negative.

A. Negatively Stated: False Teachers who deny the Second Coming keep you from knowing Christ through the Bible

Though we have the resources of the whole canon to grow us in grace and the knowledge of Christ, we must recognize that false teachers who deny the second coming keep us from knowing Christ through the Bible. The threat to the knowledge is real, and it is extreme. It can be summed as people within the church who have assimilated to a secular age and who therefore deny God's presence and activity in history. The uniformitarian hypothesis is a threat to the knowledge of Christ, because to know Christ is to know Him as the one who has decisively intervened at multiple points in history. It is to know Him as a promise-keeping God, not a slow, lazy God.

So even as you seek to know Christ through the whole canon of Scripture, you must beware of the false teachers who would get in between you and that goal. The worst false teacher of all is the one in your own heart that enjoys believing falsehood. Beware of that guy!

B. Positively Stated: True Christianity knows Christ using the whole Bible

But Peter's positive message, as we will see over the course of this series, is that the true Christian grows in the knowledge of Christ by using the whole Bible.

In a 1500-word letter, would you be likely to quote from every part of the canon? Peter did. And he did within the frame of growing in God's favor and getting to know Jesus better because the Bible is how you do that. Do you want to grow in grace and the knowledge of Christ? Then listen to the whole Bible. Listen to what Peter has to say to us in this little book. This is Peter's testimony, what he wanted to leave behind at his death. He tells us that he wants us to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ by shunning false teaching and listening instead to the true message of the whole word of God. So let's do that, day by day, week by week, becoming more like Jesus. To Him be the glory both now and in the day of eternity. Amen.