

## Peter's Epistles #17

### Imitating Christ

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**Virtuous Thinking and Spiritual Maturity:** Spiritual maturity cannot be achieved through a superficial understanding or application of the virtues of scripture. For virtue is truth, distilled and applied to the individual life. All we know, all we understand, all we believe about the truths of the Bible must come together into patterns of thinking which become habitual and then we must follow through with our words and our deeds as well. We have not been left alone in this objective of reaching maturity and achieving a life of virtuous thinking and acting. God has provided an extensive support system to aid us in our task which is not restricted to the help we receive from all facets of the church; we have also been given a detailed pattern to follow, namely the virtuous life of our master, Jesus Christ:

Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers in order to prepare all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might be thus be built up, until we all reach that unifying goal of believing what is right and of giving our complete allegiance to the Son of God, that each of us might be a perfect person, that is, that we might attain to that standard of maturity whose "attainment" is defined by Christ; that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, but rather that we may, by embracing the truth in love, grow up in all respects, with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love.

Ephesians 4:11-16

**Christ Our Role Model:** The Christian life, the Christian walk should be characterized by the virtues taught in the Word of God. We have said that love embodies all of these virtues, and that a life of perfect love would necessarily be an entirely virtuous one. Such was the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. During His tenure on this earth, He embodied and exemplified the love of God, and by His own example, facing the same difficulties of life which we face (yet to a far more intense degree, Heb.4:15), He gave us a pattern to model ourselves by, footsteps, by which if we should only follow them, we would be lead by the straight road to a virtuous life well-pleasing to God (1Pet.2:21-25; cf. Matt.16:24; Jn.13:15).

The Bible is about Jesus Christ (Jn.5:39), about the love of God demonstrated in His gift of Jesus Christ (Jn.3:16), for love comes from God and God is love (1Jn.4:7-8). In this sense then, every

page of the Bible reflects the character of God and the love of Christ, and we should try to retain this perspective as we study the scriptures. Spiritual growth, as we have seen, is a process of transformation, and the ideal goal of that process is the formation of the character of Jesus Christ within each one of us (Gal.4:19). To accomplish this heady goal, we need to "imitate Christ" (1Cor.11:1) and "put on Christ" (Rm.13:14) until He "dwells in our hearts" (Eph.3:16-17). The contexts of each of these passages show that this reproduction of Christ's character is part and parcel of this transformation of our thinking which we have been discussing. In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:1, the command to "imitate Christ" is given in a context of self-sacrifice, of giving others more consideration than ourselves when it comes to their spiritual advance (1Cor.10:23-33). The command to "put on Christ" in Rm.13:14 is given in a context of rejecting the vices of the sin nature so that we may conduct our spiritual "walk" in a decent way. Lastly, Paul's prayer for Christ to "dwell in our hearts" (Eph.3:16-17) is accomplished "by faith" and is predicated on our prior "internal strengthening in the inner man by the Holy Spirit", a process as we have seen involving the adjustment of our thinking to the principles of truth taught in God's Word. Emulating the character of our Lord is only possible when we begin thinking as He did, putting the spiritual welfare of others before ourselves, rejecting the claims of the sin nature, and turning to the Word and the Spirit of God for our strength.

**Christ Our Model in Humility:** If we are serious about reforming our thinking, one of the patterns of thinking we need to put into place right from the start is that of humility. If we are to "imitate Christ" (1Cor.11:1) we must develop the same humble outlook Christ possessed. Pride, the placing of self before all other considerations, was the original sin of both Satan and Adam (Is.14:13-14; Gen.3:6). Pride, or arrogance, is the antithesis of the self-sacrifice of love and concern for others that is closely associated with the virtue of humility. Humility is a virtuous frame of mind which we are commanded to maintain, and our exemplar for this attitude is our Lord:

You too should have this attitude which Christ Jesus had. Since he already existed in the very form of God, equality with God was not something He felt He had to grasp for. Nevertheless, He deprived Himself of His status and took on the form of a slave, born in the likeness of men. He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, a death on the cross at that. Philippians 2:5-8

Paul's example of Christ's humble, loving sacrifice puts the daily slights endured by our own petty egos into perspective. While arrogance (according to its etymology) means to demand honors and considerations to which we have no right, Christ had every right to be treated as the deity He was. Yet in love, He freely offered Himself to become a slave for us and to die in our place. As Christians who espouse to follow our Lord, we must "think virtuously" as Christ did and maintain a perspective of humility. We may not be called upon to give our lives for others, but we should at least try to hold onto the perspective that Christ died for all others as well as for ourselves. If our Chief Shepherd laid down His life for our fellow believers, should we not at least treat them with tolerance and forgiveness? An attitude of service to others rather than a self-serving one is a necessary ingredient in the process of virtue thinking. Humility, then, is one of the virtues or attitudes that should characterize the thinking of the mature believer. An

absence of humility or the presence of arrogance is a sure indication that one is not concentrating on principles of truth, not imitating Christ, and not thinking virtuously.

**Christ Our Model in Testing:** As we attempt to transform our life-style by first transforming our thinking, we should keep in mind that the devil and his numerous minions are not likely to allow the positive steps we take to go unchallenged. Just as Christ met the temptations brought against Him by Satan in the wilderness with biblical principles (Matt.4:4-10), so we must ever be ready to do the same. That is not to suggest that we must find a particular scripture to meet every possible exigency of life, but rather that this habit of focusing our thinking around those positive virtues we have learned to emulate through our Lord's example will stand us in good stead in our hour of testing just as they did Him. Moreover, testing and temptation always have two elements: the external event or stimulus that "puts the pressure on", and that old ally upon which Satan can always count to lend a hand in bringing us down, our own internal sin nature.

Passing the tests and overcoming the temptations that fall into every believer's life (and are in fact an essential part of spiritual advance) should be viewed from at least two perspectives. First, successful negotiation of a difficult test is a positive thing, a following of the Lord in spite of the pressure to do otherwise. Second, such behavior is also a denial and defeat of the sin nature which necessarily supports all that is contrary to the will of God. If we are to "put on Christ" (Rm.13:14) and do as He did in the wilderness, we must at the same time "put off the old man" (the sin nature) who bids us to follow our lusts instead of God's will (Col.3:9-10). We must learn to focus on the truth of the Word of God, and *that* is the main point behind the concept of "virtue thinking".

We must learn to interpret our experiences through the principles of truth God expects us to know and use, and not instead try to make God's plan for our lives fit our own circumstances. As Satan tried to confuse the issue for our Lord in the wilderness, so he has developed an entire world system full of confusing, tempting, and disorienting allurements and difficulties to ply us from the truth as well. Christ passed His tests by being perfectly focused on the Word and the will of His Father. When He was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, He replied to Satan's testing with truth. For us to emulate our Lord in our hour of trial, we must do the same, and in order to reply to any given situation with truth, we must of course first be thinking principles of truth. It is not always possible for us to resort immediately to our Bibles the moment we run into trouble. If we are to function effectively day by day as Christians here in the devil's world, we must have God's truth in usable form in our minds at all times. We must be in the habit of concentrating on the virtues of scripture (i.e. principles of correct behavior and attitude) at all times.

**Christ in Our Hearts:** Only after we are "strengthened in the inner man" do we achieve an inner focus and concentration upon our Lord whereby He can truly be said to "dwell in our hearts" (Eph.3:16-17). This process of strengthening (as Ephesians chapter three tells us) is accomplished "through faith", with the help of "the Holy Spirit", and is based on a foundation of "love". The sequence is clear: the growth of faith and love (with God's help) fuel in turn the process of inner-growth until Christ becomes our all in all. The strengthening of our

inner-selves, therefore, is inseparable from our development of, concentration on and application of virtue. Only then can we hope to arrive at that place where, like the apostle Paul, Christ is at the center of our earthly life, and our passage to the next means only gain (Phil.1:21). To be the sort of Christians that God wants us to be then, requires continued growth so that we may reach this level of maturity necessary to fix our gaze ever more firmly on Jesus, and to approximate the virtuous walk and life of our Master.

**Techniques of Virtue Thinking:** The scriptures abound with examples of believers whose virtuous deeds seem awesome and unapproachable. What Christian has not wished to have the patience of Job, the joy of David, the faith of Daniel, or the peace of Paul? These and other virtues are truly within the grasp of us all. The great "cloud of witnesses" of the past (Heb.12:1) all had the ability to pierce through the haze of earthly existence and see beyond it with the eyes of faith. They could be patient, faithful, joyful and experience true inner peace because they "saw" that there was a bigger, better picture beyond the sufferings and disappointments of time, that the alarm and confusion of this life which constantly bombards and disorients us is a passing distraction, that the more important reality of God, our eternal home to come, and the duties we have to that citizenship immeasurably transcend the problems of the visible life here on earth. Such a perspective is open to all believers, but is not automatic. It requires a conscious effort to apply Christian virtues learned through the study of scripture. To that end, let us consider a few basic principles of application:

**1. Basic Orientation:** If we were attempting to navigate through a strange forest with a map, the information contained on the map would be of little use unless we could also orient it; that is, turn it in the correct direction so that the information on the map becomes meaningful and relates to what we actually see. Similarly, the virtues of scripture act as sort of internal "compass". They help us to orient to the life we live here on earth, forming a bridge between the truth of the Bible and the actual circumstances with which we have to deal. Before we consider specific virtues, we should note that scripture provides us with definite virtuous guidelines to help orient our thinking to God and God's will:

- We should focus our thinking upon heavenly, not earthly, things (Col.3:2; Phil.3:19-20; 4:8).
- We should think humble things, not proud things (Rm.12:2-3).
- We should set our thoughts upon things that unify our fellow believers, rather than dividing them (Rom.12:16; 15:5; 2Cor.13:11; 1Pet.3:8).
- Our thinking should resemble that of the Father, not that of man and the devil (Matt.16:23).
- We should think like the Son, and not like the self-interested (Phil.2:2-4).
- We should think like the Spirit, not like the flesh (Rm.8:6).
- We should think like mature people, not like children (1Cor.13:11; Phil.3:15).

These are all very definite "directions" in which our Christian thoughts should flow. Keeping them firmly in mind will help us to stay oriented, meditating upon the things which are pleasing to God and moving forward in the right, virtuous "direction".

**2. Progression of Virtues:** Viewing things on the largest possible scale is often difficult. As we have noted, all virtue can be resolved into love (God's love for us manifest in Jesus Christ and our love response to Him and His creatures), and the entire Bible can rightly be seen as a training ground for that most essential Christian virtue. On a practical level, however, we imperfect and less than omniscient humans often need things spelled out for us in greater detail. We need something we can sink our teeth into more affirmatively, especially in the earlier stages of growth. We can find some initial help in our desire for more detail in the second epistle of Peter where the apostle gives us a list of some of the most basic Christian virtues. These he ranks for us not necessarily by their importance, but rather in order of their natural progression, like a series of building blocks, each laying the foundation for the one that follows and is in some sense based upon its predecessor:

And to this end, along with your faith zealously develop morality, and along with morality, knowledge, and along with knowledge, self-control, and along with self-control, perseverance, and along with perseverance, godliness, and along with godliness, love of the brethren, and along with love of the brethren, love. For if these things be in your possession and increasing, they will render you neither unfit nor fruitless in your confession of our Lord Jesus Christ. 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 1:5-8

The progression in 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter is then as follows: faith, morality, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, love of the brethren and love. These virtues are not mutually exclusive, and so overlap to certain degree. Nevertheless, the progression suggested by Peter makes good sense and will help to explain how we can build up to more virtuous Christian living. In common with Paul's famous "short list" (1Cor.13:13), virtue begins with faith and ends with love.

- **Faith**, implicit trust in God and His Son, Jesus Christ, is the bedrock upon which all growth is founded. We must first believe in Him, in His Son and His Son's saving work, in the veracity of His words and the reality of His promises to us of resurrection and reward in order to make spiritual progress (Heb.11:6).
- **Morality** is an appropriate translation for the Greek *arete* as Peter is using it in this context. Though usually translated "virtue" or "excellence", in Thucydides (and elsewhere), this word does sometimes have the meaning of "what is right and proper" in a given situation. "Doing the right thing" is the sort of excellence or virtue Peter has in mind here, and our idea of upright, moral conduct (in all areas of life) best conveys the meaning.
- **Knowledge** is next on Peter's list. Once we have learned to trust in God and Christ, and have "cleaned up our act", the next step is to expand our understanding and knowledge of the teachings and principles of God's Word. This is not to suggest, however, that we should not have been seeking knowledge from the beginning, but rather to impress upon us the importance of establishing a certain rectitude of life immediately after believing in Christ: we should not "wait for information" before making basic corrections in our

behavior that even common sense will tell us are not compatible with Christian conduct. Continued spiritual growth, however, does require knowledge, and lots of it, being fed by the source, the truth of the Word of God.

- **Self-control** is such an important element in the development of a proper Christian walk, that the apostle Paul made it one his key points in giving the gospel to Felix (along with righteousness and the judgment to come: Acts 24:25). Self-control is the Greek word *engkrateia*, and in the New Testament refers to all aspects of controlling the sin nature with its diverse lusts and desires. The word covers a large amount of territory, including everything from sins of the tongue and mind to more overt and gross behavior. Although saved, we are not separated from the sin nature inhabiting our flesh during this life, and so only with strong and consistent self-control of this ready source of embarrassment and trouble can we hope to make progress in virtue and spiritual growth.
- **Perseverance** is a quality we will find ourselves in need of when testing comes our way (Jas.1:3-4; Heb.12:1). And just as soon as we have established a good Christian life, making progress in learning about God and His will while exercising good control over our behavior, we can definitely expect to be tested. Perseverance and hope are closely linked by the apostle Paul (Rom.8:25), and in perseverance (lit. "abiding under" the pressure of testing), we have the closest thing to hope on Peter's list. Perseverance is sticking to our beliefs and applications (such as consistently taking in God's Word) even when the pressure and testing mounts. Hope is the flip-side of perseverance. Our confident expectation that after death we shall be with the Lord forever, that we shall experience a glorious resurrection of this present, fragile body, and that we shall be rewarded for our faithful service to the Lord here in this life all contribute to a perspective that transcends the present moment and instead fixes our gaze on the eternal realities which so out-shine the difficulties of the present. This is the hope that gives us the will to endure and persevere.
- **Godliness** is another virtue with a specialized meaning in this context. The word *eusebeia* is based on the same root (*seb-*) which the Greeks chose to translate Octavian's honorary title given to him as emperor, "Augustus", and is connected with the ideas of awe, reverence, and worship. There is, therefore, (strictly speaking) no mention of God in the word commonly translated "godliness", but it does convey the meaning of acting in a pious, reverent or "godly" way. It is the notion of piety which counts heaviest here. In Roman terms, to be *pius*, one had to fulfill one's duties to the gods, one's family and country. The fulfillment of duty, specifically of ministry based on one's individual spiritual gift is a large part of what Peter means to convey in this part of his progression of virtues. Once we have built a Christian life characterized by faith, uprightness, study of the Bible, control of our sin nature, and have developed the ability to withstand the testing of life, then it is high time for us to start to "give back" to our fellows in the Church by putting our faith into action; that is, by fulfilling whatever ministry God has given us to do. This is our proper and godly application of virtue once we reach this stage of growth.

- **Love of the brethren** (*philadelphia*, that is, love of our fellow Christians) and **love** (*agape*, that is, Christian love directed towards all people) are the two crowning virtues on this list. It is quite interesting that Peter splits these two. What this means is that while we owe love to all, our first priority as believers is to other believers. This in no way suggests that we should be stingy or selfish with our love and Christian ministrations towards unbelievers, but rather that we must take care of our "Christian family" first. As the premier virtue, when *agape*-love truly characterizes our lives, it is a sure sign that the other virtues are present and functioning as well.

Peter concludes his list by saying that if we possess and foster all these virtues, we shall be "neither ineffectual nor fruitless in our full-knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2Pet1:8). The "full-knowledge" described here is the Greek *epignosis*, which means more than the knowledge (gnosis) from the list above: *epignosis* connotes a full, effective, directed knowledge, a recognition, an allegiance, a complete understanding upon which one follows through, in other words, a *virtuous* application of knowledge possessed.

3. **Faith, Hope and Love:** Paul's famous basic list of virtues in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:13 consists of faith, hope, and love. As with Peter's list, Paul's is also progressive. Love is the ultimate virtue, but, in practical terms, its employment is dependent upon our spiritual growth (a process requiring our prior development of faith and hope). "These three things" are what Paul tells us are left to us once the spectacular gifts of the early, inaugural period of the Church have ceased to function. We, the body of Christ, are to substitute virtue for the marvels of tongues, prophecy, healing and the like. It is virtue, practiced by every member of the body that must carry us through until the Lord's return when we shall see Him face to face:

- **Faith** is the eyesight of our new Christian life which guides us on our way along the path God has given us to tread in this life (2Cor.4:18; 5:7). As believers in Jesus Christ, we have confidence, trust, faith that what God has told us is true despite the contrary testimony of the world (1Cor.1:21). The world actively seeks to undermine our faith, but we believe the promises that God has given to us (2Cor.7:1). We believe that our sins have been forgiven because Christ died for them in our place. We believe that through our faith in Him and His work we shall live forever. We believe that this temporary body we now occupy will be transformed, even if it shall have first turned to dust, into a glorious, eternal dwelling place that shall never see decay. We believe that all the sorrows, tears and hardships of this life will pass away forever in the eternal life to come (Rev.21:4). We believe that Christ has gone before us to prepare a place for us that we may be with Him forever (Jn.14:2-3). We believe all these things and more because God has promised them to us (Heb.11:6). We believe in His character, and in the veracity of His Word. In spite of the hammering of life, we maintain, we build our faith, being strengthened therein by the very testing we endure (Jas.1:2-4; 1Pet.1:6-7). We know the truth, not because we can quantify it, not because we can prove it, not because we can produce empirical evidence for it – quite the opposite (Heb.11:1). Our faith is the only

proof we need, not self-sufficient in itself, but grounded in the character of God Himself (1Pet.1:21). We have faith – in God, in Jesus Christ His Son, and in the promises given to us and contained in the holy scriptures. Faith gives us the strength to endure the disappointments and heartaches of life, for we trust God that He is ordering everything we experience for our ultimate good (Rom.8:28).

- **Hope** blends directly into faith as our heart reaches out to embrace the unseen, glorious, future realities which God has promised to us. As faith places confidence and trust in the person and character of God and His Son Jesus Christ, so hope takes that trust and focuses it on eternity, on the marvelous promises of the life to come. Hope cuts through the veil of earthly sorrow like a laser, zeroing in on the inexpressible joy of being in the presence of our Lord forever in a perfect body and in company with all the saints. Hope is that part of our "faith eyesight" which penetrates eternity and affirms the reality of these unseen wonders (Rom.8:23-25). Our hope is not an empty dream, but a reality unseen whereby we yearn to leave this world behind and put on the new body of eternal life which will be ours forever in the presence of the Lord (2Cor.5:1-9), looking not to the transient treasures of this life, but, like Moses, setting our gaze on the reward which God will give us (Heb.11:26). This hope of ours, our confidence that God will fulfill all these marvelous promises, anchors our thoughts to heaven, where our Lord has already gone before us to prepare all things (Heb.6:18-20).
- **Love**, in our march to maturity, is built upon this hope (Col.1:4-5). With complete and perfect confidence in God, with our eyes firmly set on the true and eternal realities, we are prepared to appreciate and love our Lord with all that is in us, and to reflect that love to others (Matt.5:14-16). Love must begin for us with God (1Jn.4:19). God is love, and we only have the capacity to love because He has given it to us (1Jn.4:7-8). His love for us is centered in the gift of His Son Jesus Christ to die in our place (Jn.3:16). How then can we fail to love someone who has delivered us from the power of death at a time when we were still His enemies (Rom.5:8)? Consequently we feel gratitude and joy for the salvation that God has so graciously bestowed upon us through the loving sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Jn.15:13). Our ultimate commandment as believers in Him is to reflect the wondrous love that God has poured out on us by showing that same love to our fellow believers (Jn.15:12). Love is the greatest of the virtues (1Cor.13:13); it is the "glue" of maturity which holds together all of the other virtues and guarantees that we are walking as Christ would have us walk (Col.3:12-14).

*Faith* focuses upon the trustworthiness of God; in faith we follow Him because we trust Him.

*Hope* focuses upon the promises God has made to us; we endure this life with joy, because we have been promised a far better one forever.

*Love* appreciates what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and reflects that gratitude to others; we serve Him and His Church in love because He first loved us.

These three virtues should never be far from our thoughts. With them our hearts can peel back the harsh surface of this life and see clearly the important realities that lie hidden to eye, the realities of God's character, His inviolable promises, and His ineffable love. Faith, hope and love should be the "channels" down which we are ever directing our thoughts. They are the touchstones against which we should be continually evaluating our Christian walk.

**4. Poles of Application:** As we attempt to traverse the straight and narrow road that leads to salvation (Matt.7:14), the Word of God provides us with guideposts to help us keep on the track, "curbs", if you will, which serve as clear reminders when we veer too sharply in one direction or another. Extreme negative guideposts are the clear prohibitions of God (e.g. "thou shalt not steal", Ex.20:15), while the ultimate positive guidepost is the commandment to love one another (Jn.13:34). But there are many other indicators given to us as well. Here are just a few examples of the negative and positive "poles of application" scripture gives us to regulate our conduct:

(+) we are told to be joyful (Phil.4:4); (-) we are told not to grumble (Phil.2:14).

(+) we are told to be merciful (Jas.2:13); (-) we are told not to judge (Matt.7:1-2).

(+) we are told to be tolerant (Phil.4:5); (-) we are told to restrain our anger (Eph.4:26).

Such positive and negative guideposts are ubiquitous in the scriptures. We are even given a number of catalogs against which to compare our Christian walk. James, for example, in describing the wisdom which comes from above, provides us with some positive characteristics of the virtuous life: "holy, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and without hypocrisy" (Jas.3:17). Paul, on the other hand, in describing the character of men in the last days, lists a number of vices to be avoided: "conceited, greedy, boastful, arrogant, blasphemous, disrespectful to their parents, ungrateful, wicked, unloving, implacable, slanderers, lacking self-control, savage, despisers of what is good, recklessly treacherous and puffed-up, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, with an appearance of Godliness yet rejecting its true meaning" (2Tim.3:2-5). As we try these characteristics on for size, the good and the bad, we should be encouraged to strive to emulate the positive and eschew the negative.

Nearly every page of the Bible contains such guideposts that, when considered with humility, can help to direct and mold our Christian walk and develop the virtuous lifestyle God wants us to embrace. Such specifics are important, because (as careful consideration of the above lists should indicate) "love" and "don't sin" are such all-encompassing commands that we can easily be lulled into a false belief that we are doing better than we actually are. Whenever we read such verses, we ought to make a habit of reflecting on just what is meant, and of then asking ourselves whether or not our lives are characterized by such behavior.

So, for example, when in Titus 2:12 Paul tells us that we should live a life characterized by prudence, righteousness and godliness, we should consider what these characteristics really are:

- *prudence*: a wise caution toward any sinful or spiritually risky behavior.
- *righteousness*: honest, upright and just behavior.
- *godliness*: fulfilling one's spiritual duty in a blameless way.

In this way, we shall take full advantage of each such opportunity to examine our behavior, fine tuning it according the standard of God's Word.

**5. Reactive Application:** Ideally, we should be actively applying principles of virtue at all opportunities. However, given the tendency of everyday life to distract us with its often frenetic pace, it can be helpful to keep in mind that virtue-thinking is also a valid reaction to momentary spiritual failures, helping us to reorient to proper spiritual conduct.

Sin of all types constitutes a spiritual setback, and even seemingly "minor" lapses in attitude, require confession (in private prayer to God: 1Jn.1:9). Nevertheless, these lapses can also serve as an opportunity to refocus our thoughts on virtue (especially to the virtues most clearly opposite to the sin we have fallen into).

The facet of our makeup as human beings which is most directly concerned with monitoring our spiritual status both before such episodes (as a preventive agent) and after (as a corrective agent) is the conscience. "Conscience" is a way of expressing how our heart prods us to remember what is right and wrong in any number of circumstances. While even unbelievers have an innate sense of right and wrong (Rom.2:15), as Christians we are daily molding, correcting, and refining our conscience (1Cor.8:7-12; 10:25-29).

We are also fortunate to possess in the Holy Spirit a helper to aid our conscience. Indeed, we are specifically directed not to resist (and thus neutralize) His ministry to us (Eph.4:30; 1Thes.5:19).

So when we notice a negative in our lives, it behooves us not merely to reject that negative, but to make use of the opportunity to actively set our thinking back on a positive track. For, after all, a "good conscience" is part and parcel of the "love from a pure heart" and "non-hypocritical faith" that we are commanded to produce (1Tim.1:5).

**6. Virtue Under Pressure:** Suffering is the greatest developer of virtue (Rom.5:3-5; Jas.1:2-4; 1Pet.1:6-7). To be successful as Christians, we must learn to put a spin on hardships and reverses which is completely different from the thinking of the rest of the world, "boasting in our tribulations", "counting it all joy", and recognizing that this "testing of our faith is more valuable than purest gold". The fact is, we have not been called to lives of unencumbered luxury, tranquility and prosperity. In fact, the more we grow, the more we can expect to be tested and refined by God. As our Lord has told us, "every branch in Me which bears fruit, My Father prunes it that it might bear more fruit" (Jn.15:2).

There can be no vacuum of action in the Christian life: spiritual security goes hand in hand with spiritual momentum (Phil.2:12; 2Pet 1:10; 1Jn.2:24, 2<sup>nd</sup> Jn.1:8). Nor does mere longevity equate to spiritual growth (Heb.5:12). Growth involves testing, and the more we grow, the more we are

tested (as the apostle Paul's life of extreme pressure indicates: 1Cor.4:9-13; 2Cor.6:1-13; 11:16-33). This stands to reason when we consider that the more truth we learn, the greater our responsibility to apply that information to our lives (Jas.4:17). If we may compare the learning of essential principals of truth to physical nutrition, we can extend the analogy by comparing the application of the Word (putting principals of truth into action in our daily lives, especially in times of testing) to physical exercise. Just as lifting weights puts a load on our muscles, and, coupled with proper nutrition, causes our muscles to grow, so God exercises us with spiritual weights in the form of testing (difficult choices, suffering, loss, delays in answering our prayers, etc.). If we persevere in lifting these weights, we will make headway in the area of spiritual growth as our faith puts on muscle (1Tim.4:7-8).

It is in the normal order of things for Christians, especially Christians who are sincerely trying to advance, to come up against severe testing, testing so difficult that it puts serious pressure on faith. Let us remember the example of Abraham, who initially had a hard time trusting God for the heir he so deeply desired, but who, in the end, was willing to sacrifice that heir on God's command, because he had faith that God would work it all out for good somehow. Let us also remember the example of Job, who, having endured so much for so long, finally lost his patience only to be rebuked by God and reminded of his relative ignorance of the power and purpose of God: we may not understand why, but we should trust God that there is a good reason why we suffer, and trust Him to work all things out for us in His own time and in His own way. Finally, let us finally remember the very specific promise that God has given us in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:13, where we are told that He will never subject us to testing that is truly unbearable and will, in the end, provide us with a solution: in the depths of sorrow, disappointment, frustration, loss and failure, we may well feel that we cannot go on, but we must trust Him that He will help us, and that He will work things out for our good (Rom.8:28).

Suffering is, after all, the ultimate test of our faith in God, of our confident hope in His deliverance, and of our love for Him in spite of circumstances. As we walk through this life of tears and toils, can we trust Him to lead us through the sorrow, can we see beyond the heartaches of the moment to the glorious future ahead, can we love Him even when it hurts, taking His hand and trusting Him that all the pain has a purpose, producing for us an eternal "weight of glory" that is not to be compared with these present sufferings (2Cor.4:17)? Many Christians can "have faith", set their hope on God and love Him when the sun shines, but unflagging trust in God, hope in His promise of eternity, and love for Him and His is harder to come by when the storms of life have struck us a severe blow. These, however, are the times when our spiritual character is truly put to the test, and we find out just how deep our Christian virtues run.

**7. Prayer:** Prayer, our constant dialogue with God (1Thes.5:17), is an important part of applying virtue to our lives. In Philippians 4:6-8, Paul tells us that if we stop worrying and take our concerns to God in prayer, His peace, a peace powerful enough to calm all human anxiety, will protect us, guarding our very feelings and thoughts. In His peace, accessed through prayer, our trust in Him, love for Him, and hope of the fulfillment of His promises to us blend into a single comforting whole, and we can affirm with Him that if we have first sought the kingdom of God, all our earthly concerns will be taken care of (Matt.6:25-33). Prayer, especially consistent,

persistent prayer, is a necessary habit for the implementation of Christian virtue, because prayer redirects our thinking towards God. Prayer should be our primary method of reorienting our thinking toward God, toward His power and His solutions to our problems. When we pray, we remind ourselves of our great need for Him and His help, and thus we bring our thinking back into agreement with His thinking.

**8. Reflection:** Psalm 1 tells us that the "blessed man" delights in the teachings of the Lord and on them he "meditates day and night" (v.2). Every scrap of scripture, every scintilla of Bible teaching helps (often in ways that are not immediately obvious) to form a web of understanding and mature perspective that should grow stronger with each passing day. We cannot spend every waking hour in the admittedly crucial pursuit of learning about the Lord and His teachings, but in the course of a day we often have time to think. What do our thoughts focus upon during these interludes? Do we concentrate on our worries and problems? Should we not rather use such opportunities to refresh our spirits by calling upon the truths which are so precious to us?

Just as our bodies need a constant flow of blood to function, so our spirits ought to be fed by a continual flow of truth. Focusing upon basic principles of virtue, the perspectives of love and gratitude for God, faith in His promises, and hope in our eternal reward, for example, is a good way to initiate this process, and to draw upon all the wonderful "spiritual capital" of truth stockpiled in our hearts. Let us keep the truth "circulating" in our thoughts as often as we may so that we can fulfill the command to "seek the things above" where our Lord dwells (Col.3:1-2).

**Conclusion:** Making a habit of mentally focusing on key Christian virtues (teachings which relate to important aspects of our daily walk) is a valuable technique in keeping us aware of our position in the plan and purpose of God, and an essential part of spiritual growth. Knowing and doing the will of God for our lives is the goal of virtue-thinking (Col.1:9-10; Rom.12:2), and as we meditate on the virtues which should characterize our behavior, we cannot help but evaluate our Christian walk and be motivated to bring our conduct more into line with that will (Eph.5:18).

As we become increasingly consistent about focusing on our trust in God, the love He has for us (which we should reflect), and the wonderful hope of a blessed eternity with Him, we gain a contentment which is not only an antidote for the lusts, worries, and testings of life, but which also is approachable only by Christians who have put their faith, hope and love in the power and person of God (2Cor.9:8; Phil.4:10-14; 1Tim.6:8-10; Heb.13:5-6):

- We focus on faith when we trust God to help us through all of our difficulties; we let Him take us by the hand and lead us; we have no fear though we may not know where we are being taken, because we have faith in Him that He is doing what is best for us (Ps.23; Rom.8:28).
- We focus on love when we remember how much He cares for us - so much that He sacrificed His Son for us (Jn.3:16), and so we know that a God who has paid such a price in His love for us will surely never allow us to be parted from His love (Rom.8:31-39); and so, in confidence of that love, we strive to reflect it to our fellows for His glory.

- We focus on hope when remember that our lives here are transient, but there is a life that never ends in the presence of God, filled with glory and happiness, an eternity without suffering, in a marvelous new body and a place all our own in the New Jerusalem.

The Christian virtues are really truths, truths which must be lived as well as learned to achieve maturity, truths which are therefore important for us to consider every day, and which, when we finally allow our minds to rest upon them, keep us oriented to things that really matter to us as Christians.