

Peter's Epistles #16

Leadership of the Holy Spirit

(also available on-line at Ichthys.com)
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Reviewing Spiritual Growth: We find ourselves in the midst of an important digression on the subject of spiritual growth. This study was occasioned by Peter's wish for all believers to experience an increase of grace and peace from God (1Pet.1:2). As we noted at the time we first studied this passage, spiritual growth is the only means, the only path to any fulfillment of this wish in our daily lives. Experiencing the power of God's grace and love, and the joy that fills the heart when we are truly focused on Him requires the steady growth of our *inner person* (Eph. 3:16). Spiritual growth is both the prerequisite for and the means to obtaining the increase of God's blessing to which Peter refers.

We should not, however, think of such blessing in primarily material terms. This is not to say that God never pours forth material blessings upon believers (we need only to think of Abraham or Joseph). Nevertheless, it is true that the New Testament in particular warns us of the hardships and sufferings which accompany spiritual progress (1Pet.4:12-19). We would, therefore, be well advised to think of the blessings attendant upon spiritual growth likewise in spiritual terms. These are the sorts of blessings which attend spiritual growth and which transcend material gain in this world (Matt.6:19-21):

- to know the true happiness of putting Christ at the center of our lives (Phil.3:8-11).
- to fulfill the potential of production to which we have been called (Matt.13:23; Lk.8:15).
- to anticipate God's approval of our lives as a job well done (Matt.25:21).

Principles of Spiritual Growth: When we first began talking about spiritual growth, we spent a good deal of time on the parable of the sower (Matt.13; Mk.4; Lk.8). The plant which springs from the seed of the Word of God represents us, our faith and spiritual life. Those who do "take root" (actually conceiving a saving faith in Jesus Christ) have two problematic growth phases to contend with before they can "bear fruit" or be productive in God's plan:

1) they must *send their roots down* deep enough to gather sufficient moisture to withstand the heat of the sun (that is, they must take in and retain by faith enough truth or "spiritual nutrition" to build up their faith so as to withstand the times of testing which come into the lives of all believers in Jesus Christ).

2) they must *rise above* the earthly "weeds" that will otherwise choke their growth and prevent them from bearing fruit (that is, they must not only hold on to their faith in times of testing, but must learn to apply what they have learned to life, subordinating earthly concerns and

desires to their heavenly hope and persevering in the unique production God has given to each believer despite the pressures of life).

Overcoming life's testing requires much biblical "ammunition", distilled into principles of truth and stored in the heart by faith. To weather the constant storm of life, however, requires more than an emergency procedure of accessible principles; it requires a whole new approach to life, a whole new way of thinking. We shall call this approach "virtue thinking".

Introduction to Virtue Thinking: When we become Christians, things change dramatically for us (2Cor.5:17). Though still residing here in the devil's world throughout our earthly life, we have nevertheless been delivered from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God (Col.1:13). Our status has completely changed, and now our manner of thinking must change as well. Our spiritual growth depends upon us laying claim to our "new man" status by actively "*making ourselves new through spiritual thinking*" (Eph.4:23; cf. Ps.16:8 and the Psalms in general).

The development of spiritual or "virtue" thinking is a necessary part of the process of "sanctification in time" (see Pet.#13 for a complete treatment of the doctrine of sanctification). As we have seen, "sanctification in Christ" and "sanctification in eternity" are immediate developments accomplished by God for us and require no sustained effort on our part. However, attempting to fulfill the mandate to be holy as God is holy (1Pet.1:16), involves more than avoiding negative behavior. It also requires positive progress in God's plan through our active pursuit of the goal of spiritual maturity. "When I was a child", the apostle Paul says, "I thought and reasoned as a child, but when I became a man, I did away with childish things (1Cor.13:11)." Just as we must eventually adopt a mature outlook as adults in the secular realm of life, so after we become believers we must change our pattern of thinking to reach spiritual maturity.

The Nature of Man: All human beings possess a dichotomous nature, that is to say we are all composed of spirit as well as body (Heb.12:9):

And the Lord God formed the man (i.e., Adam's body) from the dust of the ground, then blew into his nostrils the life-giving breath (i.e., his spirit), and [thus] the man became a living person.
Genesis 2:7

The first man, Adam, had a material part, a body, which the Lord made out of earth, and an immaterial part (called here "the breath of life"), which the Lord placed into his body. As a result, man became a living being. The word translated "being" in the NIV is the Hebrew *nephesh* (often translated "soul" and for which the Greek equivalent is *psyche*). As a result of God's creative act, the first man became a whole, complete, living *person*. It was only after Adam received the immaterial, life-giving part that complemented his material part that he became complete. Like Adam, we are now and, through resurrection, shall ever be body and spirit. But in these present bodies of corruption, our thinking is naturally drawn to conform more to the evil world around us than to the spiritual side of our makeup (Rom.7:18).

The Heart: Human thought is a product of what the Bible often calls the "heart" (i.e., the *entire* inner person, comprising all thoughts, emotions, etc.). According to the system of psychology in the Bible, the heart is the place where body and spirit interact, a place strictly distinct from the spiritual part of our nature (1Cor.2:12; 14:14). Everything starts with the heart. Proverbs 23:7 states "as a man purposes in his heart, so he is". From a biblical point of view, the heart is "who we are". It is here, in our "heart", a place in biblical terms not at all divorced from our emotions, that we fight our most important spiritual battles. The heart is the place where we honor God, and also the place from which "proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and slanders" (Matt.15:18-19).

Therefore the "natural" thinking which held sway in our minds before salvation was heavily influenced by the lusts, desires, fears, and other emotions generated by the sin nature (1Cor.2:14). Now that we are believers, we are no longer "natural" (i.e. oriented toward the fleshly part of our nature), but "spiritual" (i.e. oriented toward the spiritual part of our nature, 1Cor.2:15). Nevertheless, even as believers, we are not now miraculously exempt from the same powerful influences to worldly thought which led us astray before we were saved. To free ourselves from slavery to our old, pre-salvation ways, and to transform our lives into a pattern of positive growth and service for God requires a transformation of our thinking as well:

Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the revitalization of your thinking, so that you may be able to discover what God's will is, that is, what is good, well-pleasing, and mature (in His sight).
Romans 12:2

The transformation of life referred to here is a spiritual one, a growing away from the old and into the new. It can only be accomplished by a new or virtuous pattern of thinking which emphasizes the spiritual side of our being and stands in stark contrast to the carnal pattern of worldly thinking which surrounds us. So we need to think differently than we did, but what does that mean?

Transforming our Thinking: As believers, we do in fact have the means to accomplish the task given us by God of transforming our thinking. Consider some of the tools God has provided for this essential task:

- We have the Holy Spirit who helps us understand the spiritual truths that feed our growth (1Cor.2:10-16), and indeed who empowers all our Christian acts (1Cor.12:3).
- We have the right to approach God in prayer to ask for help and wisdom, as well as to commune with Him (Eph.2:18).
- We have teachers and pastors to help us understand and remember principles of truth (Eph.4:11-16; 2Pet.1:13).
- And we have the Bible, God's Word, to be our source of daily meditation and instruction (Ps.1:1-3).

Full-Time Virtue Thinking: To be effective as believers, however, and to accomplish our common objective of spiritual growth, we need to be spiritual all the time, not merely during the time we spend with God. We need to think spiritually and make proper, spiritual applications, ideally, at every waking moment. We are called to be holy in our day to day experience as we are in fact holy in our eternal status by virtue of our faith in Jesus Christ. Accomplishing this is no easy feat, and, as our extensive digression on personal sin and recovery through confession has shown (see 1st Peter lesson #15), the challenge cannot be met merely by avoiding personal sin. Such a goal is not entirely achievable, but even if it were, God is asking much more of us than this.

To the Jews of the Old Testament, the Lord gave an extremely detailed set of instructions "for holiness" which we know as the Mosaic Law. They consisted, among other things, of strict dietary rules and regulations which, while many had nothing to do with spirituality per se, were yet meant to be a means of demonstrating Israel's "separateness" to her pagan neighbors (Lev.20:24-26). Yet we know from Paul's conclusive teachings on the subject that it is impossible to keep the Law fully, and that the deeper meaning of the Law is as an evangelistic tool, for it makes clear to all who are honest with themselves that perfection by human effort is impossible, therefore "through the Law comes the awareness of sin" (Rom.3:19-20).

As Christians and partakers of the great gift of the Holy Spirit, what is expected of us is far more monumental than even the impossible standard of "keeping the Law". For while, to be sure, many of the Law's prohibitions are still valid for Christians, we are in general no longer held to this list of *negative* injunctions. We are no longer under the authority of the Law, but under the authority of grace (Rom.6:14-15), and under the greater law of Christ, the law of love (Matt.22:37-40; 1Cor.9:21; Gal.5:22-23; 6:2; Jas.2:8). Our freedom is to be used not for sinful indulgence, but for obedience whose end is righteousness (Rom.6:16-18). We are to stand firm in this freedom which God has granted us, and not again be subject to the Law which only serves to show us our sinfulness (Gal.5:1).

In practical terms, this means that in order for us as Christians to fulfill our destiny of growing up spiritually and serving God with whatever gifts He has granted us, we cannot focus merely on the *negatives* of Biblical teaching, but must place our top priority on the *positives*. Every waking moment of every day we are called upon to make correct applications of God's truth, to act as Christians should act, to do the things that the Lord wants us to do. In the course of attempting to carry out our orders, we are naturally faced with a myriad of circumstances for which no single book could be of sufficient length to cover all the intricacies of every possible situation. That is why a list of negative commands, though important, is not sufficient. That is why spiritual maturity demands a renovation of the way we think. There are indeed firm positive principles taught in the Bible to which we must adhere just as tenaciously as we do to the negative ones. For example:

- we must work for a living (2Thes.3:10)
- we must provide for our families (1Tim.5:8)

- we must be responsible citizens (Rom.13:1-8)

Nevertheless, the order of the day in applying Christian truth to everyday life is, in the vast majority of cases, *flexibility*. Flexibility does not mean compromising principles of truth, but rather recognizing that God has given us a very important category of truth designed for coping with everyday life in a Christian way, namely *Christian virtues*.

If we restructure our pattern of thinking according to the virtues God teaches us to embrace, we really will be "transformed by the revitalization of our thinking" (Rom.12:2), and find that we are on the way to "making ourselves new through spiritual thinking" (Eph.4:23). As Paul teaches us in Galatians chapter five, this is a process of rejecting the patterns of thought associated with our old life, and adopting new ones, Christian ones, patterns of thinking which correspond to and are empowered by the Holy Spirit:

For you were called unto freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but be slaves to one another through love.
Galatians 5:13

Our status as Christians is that of God's free men, but that freedom is not a license to act as completely independent agents doing whatever we please whether good or ill. Our freedom carries with it responsibility, responsibility not only to forgo sin, but also to help our fellow Christians as we grow. Paul uses the example of the premier Christian virtue, love, in illustration of the point that Christians are to emphasize positive patterns ("virtue thinking") rather than negative ones. As God loved us and sent Jesus to die for us, and as our Lord, Jesus, loves us now, we are to imitate this love, to reflect this love, and use the opportunity of our lives here on earth to help other Christians rather than to please ourselves:

For the whole Law is summed up in one statement: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
Galatians 5:14

Paul starts, as we shall, with the fundamental Christian virtue, love. That one positive virtue of love, if fully and correctly fulfilled, would accomplish the entire purpose of the Law. If we truly understood love in all its marvelous, kaleidoscopic complexities and could wrap our thoughts around it at all times, all the other virtues taught in scripture would fall effortlessly into place. If we were really more concerned for the salvation and spiritual development of others than we are for our own situations and if we acted accordingly, we really would be carrying out the Law in love.

Virtue thinking takes this principle and applies it to all the other virtues of the Bible, for, from one point of view, the other virtues are aspects of love tailored to meet more specific situations. Properly understood and applied, the virtues become foci for our thoughts and help us to approach the various situations of life in positive terms as they gain more and more prominence

in our thoughts. In general terms, if we were always doing *the right things*, we would never have to worry about doing *the wrong things*.

In order for us to do what is right, we need first to have a right attitude, a right perspective, a right way of thinking. We need to completely understand, fully accept, and continually set our hearts upon virtue. "Virtue thinking" is a means to fulfilling the commandment of "loving your neighbor as yourself". Now "love" covers quite a bit of ground, in fact, love covers it *all*. But to apply Christianity to the complexities of the world, we are going to have to break things down a bit farther, and explore a number of the more specific virtues dealt with in scripture, as well as techniques for their proper implementation.

But if you bite and devour each other, take care that you are not consumed by each other. What I mean is this: Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfill the lust of your flesh.
Galatians 5:15-16

The Galatians had apparently developed a very factious, competitive and hostile attitude toward their fellow Christians. Instead of helping one another, they were aggressively "looking out for number one". Paul points out that the end of such behavior is self-destructive. He then goes on to explain the proper approach to Christian living. If we adjust our thinking to the thinking of the Holy Spirit and adhere to His inner promptings and direction through the Word as we have taken it in, we shall find that we are not carrying out the lusts of our sinful nature and its worldly orientation.

The Holy Spirit helps us to think and do what is right if we only are willing to "participate". If we follow the good, we will necessarily avoid the bad. The "lane markers" which help us to keep us within the bounds of proper Christian conduct are virtues such as faith, hope and love. We need to understand more about these and other virtues and learn to direct our thinking down these good avenues. As we do, the Holy Spirit helps us in the process and also helps us to carry out the good deeds that spring from good thoughts:

For the lust of the flesh resists the Spirit, and the Spirit resists the flesh. These two are in opposition to each other. As a result, you do not do what you purpose yourself.
Galatians 5:17

The natural impulses of our present physical nature are sinful in their orientation. As Christians, however, we have received the pledge of the Holy Spirit. As our helper, He opposes the sinful urges within us (Jn.14:16; 16:7). The decision as to which way to go, however, still resides with us. We may feel that we are totally in control, but, as Paul tells us here, we are merely following one of our two potential leaders. Come what may, we will either choose the Spirit or the flesh in any given circumstance. The practical problem we face as Christians is that this struggle between the two is an internal one, carried out on the battleground of the heart where spirit and body meet and not expressed in words nor visible to the eyes.

More than good intentions are necessary to distinguish between these two protagonists. The Holy Spirit works with the truth we have in our hearts. The more we understand and believe about the Bible, the more potentially effective His ministry. Specifically, the more exact our understanding of Christian virtues and our concentration upon them, the more effective the help we receive in combating the power of the flesh to dominate our lives and behavior as we become more sensitive and responsive to the Spirit's guidance:

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.
Galatians 5:18

When once we have gained the knowledge, faith, and habit of following the good patterns of thought and action commissioned by the Spirit, the restrictions of the Law are no longer applicable. For the Law is holy and from God, and so any action which is selfless, loving and pure cannot be against the Law. By accommodating ourselves to the thinking of the Holy Spirit through virtue thinking, we will no longer follow the flesh:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious, such as sexual immorality, scandalous behavior, lack of sobriety, worshiping false gods, dabbling in the occult, bearing grudges, stirring up trouble, fits of jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfishness, contentiousness, divisiveness, enviousness, drunkenness, carousing, and things of this sort. Concerning these, I tell you now as I have told you before: those who make a practice of doing such thing shall not inherit the kingdom of God.
Galatians 5:19-21

Interestingly, many of the sins on Paul's list here are attitudinal in nature (contrast these with the "holy" attitude of virtue). Moreover, it is important to note that the list is deliberately not complete. Paul adds "and things of this sort" to let us know as clearly as he can that although he may not have mentioned our particular weakness, all sin, all disobedience to God comes from "following the flesh" and not taking advantage of the Holy Spirit's help.

The last statement in the quote above also demands comment. "Those who make a practice" of sinning will not find themselves in God's kingdom. We have already studied the sin problem in some depth and have seen that none of us are sinlessly perfect and that such a goal is unattainable. What this passage is referring to is the scriptural truth that "the wages of sin are death" (Rom.6:23): those who give themselves over to sin will eventually fall away from God and betray their allegiance to Jesus Christ (Rom.11:22). But by consistently following the Holy Spirit as He works on the truth in our hearts we are assured of avoiding this trap:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, uprightness, faith, humility, self-control. Against such things, there is no Law.
Galatians 5:22-23

These verses contain one of the many list of virtues given in the Bible. The list is not meant to be complete, but to serve the purpose of the context which is to contrast virtuous attitudes and

behaviors to the vices and improper conduct previously described. With these two descriptions, Paul gives us alternative images of fleshly versus spiritual conduct which are unmistakably clear. When we read them, they seem to blend together into an amalgam of baseness on the one hand and spirituality on the other. This perspective is not unintended, for all the vices and virtues mentioned above flow from one of the two opposing "power sources" which motivate and control our lives: the Holy Spirit for good, and the sin nature for bad.

Virtue thinking begins with generalities and moves on to specifics. We do not have to put our minds to it in order to be sinful; it just "comes naturally". To live as Christians ought to live, however, requires more. As believers we have, in the person of the Holy Spirit who indwells us, the "mind of Christ" (1Cor.2:15-16). But the Holy Spirit's influence depends not only upon the willingness of our hearts, but also upon our understanding of God's truth. Our understanding (knowledge *plus* belief) of the principles of Christian virtue is the spiritual capital the Holy Spirit utilizes to work out spiritual gain for us; the understanding of truth, and, in this context, of principles of virtue in particular, is the multiplier, the "mechanical advantage" that amplifies our positive efforts as we traverse the devil's world.

The brilliant light of goodness that emanates from the passage above must also be considered in terms of the specific guidelines it contains so that these can be understood and cycled through our thinking:

Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its lusts and desires.
If we live because of the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

Galatians 5:24-25

By believing in Jesus Christ, we have rejected the leadership of sin in our lives and have instead embraced the leadership of Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, we have been baptized into Him, have become one body with Him, and it is His Holy Spirit who is our Helper here on earth. The same Spirit who led us to new life in Jesus Christ now leads us along the path of spiritual advance and growth. To grow up spiritually, to "rise above" the choking concerns of life, and to be productive for God in the midst of Satan's realm requires an *active* approach to life that begins with what goes on in the "battleground" of our minds. Empowered by the Holy Spirit and continually informed and refreshed by the truth of the Word of God, this approach, which we have labeled "virtue thinking", we shall take up in greater detail next time.