

SEVEN LIVELY VIRTUES

(1) GOODNESS

2 Peter 1: 1-8

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SCRIPTURE

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: {2} May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. {3} His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. {4} Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. {5} For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, {6} and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, {7} and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. {8} For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:1-8 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

When I was about fourteen years old I got it into my head that I wanted to improve myself and become a better person. I came across an excerpt from Benjamin Franklin's autobiography in which he reports that as a young man he had a similar ambition. Consequently, he developed a "plan" for carrying this out. He made a list of thirteen virtues and pledged to concentrate on practicing one a week until he had mastered all thirteen and could live a virtuous life.¹

Inspired by this great American statesman, I pledged to do the same. I did fairly well on the first one, temperance. But being only fourteen years old in a small town, I had little opportunity to violate it. I did not do so well on the subsequent virtues and by the fourth week I was so frustrated I quit. Then I looked ahead in Franklin's autobiography and realized he had not done so well either. If only I had read ahead before I started on the

¹Franklin's list: Temperance, Silence, Order, Resolution, Frugality, Industry, Sincerity, Justice, Moderation, Cleanliness, Chastity, Tranquility, Humility.

“plan” then I could have saved myself a lot of trouble.

But this failure put me on a search for an answer as to why human beings seem unable to live a good life even when we commit to doing so. God used this search to bring me to himself and to his Son, Jesus Christ. In Christ we find the means to live out the good we were intended to live and the remedy for when we do not.

Looking back on Franklin’s “plan” I realized there was nothing wrong with the idea of practicing goodness, but it was a mistake to depend on willpower for its success. Willpower is great when there are no obstacles or temptations in the way. But as soon as it faces adversity it tends to wilt. Why do most diet plans fail? Because they depend on willpower. Why do most secular rehabilitation programs have such a low success rate? Because they depend on willpower. Willpower, by itself, is not much power.

Long ago, the Apostle Peter realized this problem and so he connected virtue with God’s power rather than willpower. He says:

“[God’s] power has given us everything needed for life” (3).

And then later:

“Make every effort to support your faith with...” (5).

And then he lists seven virtues: goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love. He connects these to faith and not willpower, to the goodness of God rather than to mere good intentions. Therefore, with a faith supported by these virtues we can live a life worth living. We can live a life that pleases God. We can live a life that is fruitful and effective in service to Jesus Christ.

Peter mentions seven virtues but he does not use the term “Seven Lively Virtues.” I am using this term as a positive alternative to the focus on what are commonly called the “Seven Deadly Sins.” The “Seven Deadly Sins” are usually listed as: wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony. Now each of these can be regarded as sin from a biblical point of view. But the idea of “Seven Deadly Sins” is not found in the Bible. It was developed at the end of the 6th Century A.D. and later became a popular theme among artists in the 14th Century who helped to ingrain the concept in European culture. In contrast to the “Seven Deadly Sins” I offer you the “Seven Lively Virtues” as found in the New Testament book of 2 Peter. We will be taking a closer look at each one in turn over the course of the summer. The “Seven Lively Virtues” or “Virtue Won’t Hurt You!”

THE PROBLEM OF VIRTUE

I started thinking about this series last summer. But at some point I asked myself, “Why on earth am I doing a series of talks on virtue? Can there possibly be a more dull, irrelevant, uninteresting, finger-down-the-throat topic than this?” You doubt me? Think of it this way. If you were given a choice between attending a seminar on “Exciting Sex in Marriage” or a workshop on “Transforming your Finances in 60 Days” or a series of “Lectures on Virtue” which one would you choose? I know the one I would choose! (Finances, of course. LOL).

Then I started thinking about why this is so. If I were the Enemy and I wanted to discourage Christians from exhibiting qualities of goodness in their lives I would not try a direct approach. Instead I would try an indirect approach. I would subtly change the meaning of words like “fortitude” and “virtue” and make them sound out-of-date, impractical and boring. And isn’t this, in fact, what has happened? Who wants to be virtuous? No one (or so it would seem). It’s not cool.

But consider the alternative. If you are not exhibiting qualities of goodness then what are you exhibiting? To reject virtue is to participate, wittingly or unwittingly, in bringing more darkness into the world. But to live in a virtuous manner is to want to bring more light into the world. The seven virtues that Peter lists for us are representative of the qualities that our faith needs to bring the light of Christ into a world that has already seen too much darkness and death. We cannot survive without virtue.

THE MEANING OF FAITH

Before we can connect any of these virtues to faith we need to understand how the word “faith” is being used in this passage. At the beginning of the letter Peter describes faith as a gift from God which puts us right with God through Jesus Christ and shows itself in practical ways that are in contrast to those who live as if there is no God. A key word is “promise.” Faith is believing in the “very great promises” of God (4). The first great promise is God’s promise to bring the full measure of redemption to bear on those who place their trust in Jesus Christ. The second, if I may put it that way, is the promise of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. There are a great many other promises in the Bible including those that are associated with the listed virtues. We connect virtue to faith by believing in the particular promise or promises associated with that virtue.

Another key word for faith is the word “support” as in “make every effort to *support* your faith” (5). This is the translation of a Greek term that referred to a generous sponsor of a stage production and later came to mean any generous giver. Genuine faith calls forth our best efforts. We are to cooperate with God without thinking of the price. There is no such thing as minimal virtue. Trying to be a little virtuous is a bit like trying to become a little pregnant. One way or another, reality is not going to match your goal.

A Christian is one who has received the gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and the indwelling power and presence of the Holy Spirit and has been called to live a fruitful and effective life. In order to live a fruitful and effective life we need to connect virtue to faith. We connect virtue to faith by believing in the promises of God and giving of ourselves in generous measure.

FIRST VIRTUE: GOODNESS

The first of the “Seven Lively Virtues” is Goodness. The Greek word can also be translated as “Virtue.” (The first virtue is Virtue!) A virtue is a character trait that is valued as good. To live the virtuous life and to live a good life means the same thing. But in today’s society, living the “good life” is often understood to include late night parties, over-indulgence, and conspicuous consumption of wealth. But this is not what the Bible means by the “good life.” I almost prefer the word “virtue” over “goodness” because virtue more clearly implies moral courage. C. S. Lewis remarked that courage is not just one of the virtues but an essential part of every virtue.²

There is a certain risk involved in following Jesus Christ. In some places in the world this may include persecution, imprisonment, or death. But in places where there is religious freedom, such as America, the risk may be of a different nature. It may mean giving up on achieving success the way society defines success. It may mean adopting values that are not popular and opposing some that are. It may mean that some will think you are weird.

Consider, what do people call someone who plays a lot of tennis? A tennis enthusiast. What do people call someone who watches several hours of football every Sunday in the fall? A sports fan. But what do people call someone who actually believes Jesus is alive and knowable and wants to change our lives for the better? An extremist. A Jesus Freak. A religious fanatic. A fundy.

The irony is that being a Christian is not about being weird. In fact, it is about being completely normal. It is about being completely and fully human, like Jesus. And since goodness was a characteristic of Jesus’ life (3), it needs to be a characteristic of our lives as well.

APPLICATION

For each of the Seven Lively Virtues I have a two-fold strategy for application: A Question to ponder, and a Promise to believe. I hope you will write down the question

² “Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.” C. S. Lewis.

and think about it during the week. I also hope you will write down the Scripture Reference for the Promise and read and re-read it during the week. By believing in the promise you connect to the power of God which brings the virtue to life.

The question to ponder for Goodness is:

What are the fears which keep you from living life to the fullest?

I suggest you name these fears, perhaps even write them down. Then re-name them in prayer, and turn them over to God asking for the courage to overcome these fears.

The Promise is found in Paul's Letter to the Philippians:

God is the one who began this good work in you, and I am certain that he won't stop before it is complete on the day that Christ Jesus returns (Philippians 1:6 CEV).

Whatever good is in your life was started by God. And what God starts God finishes. God is at work in you for a good purpose. This purpose cannot be thwarted by trouble, confusion, persecution, sickness, or even death. Believing in this promise will give you the courage to go on, the desire to live a Christ-like life, and the willingness to work with God without thinking of the price.