

SEVEN LIVELY VIRTUES

(3) SELF-CONTROL

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

Laura Smith writes:

Our young daughter was learning the fruit of the Spirit, so I asked her to recite them to me. "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and remote control!" was her reply.

Of course, remote control does sound a bit like self-control. Remote control and self-control also have something else in common: If there is no power then they are of little use. I think this is why Peter connects virtues like self-control to faith. We need the power of God to live a virtuous life, to live a life worth living.

1. VIRTUE AND SIN

The title, "Seven Lively Virtues" is a take off from the well known "Seven Deadly Sins." The Seven Deadly Sins are also known as the "Seven Capital Vices." Discussion of these vices and how to overcome them has provided a basis for moral reflection as well as a tool for spiritual formation for many centuries.

Strictly speaking, vice and sin are not synonymous. While the word “sin” can refer to specific actions that are wrong such as theft or murder, it can also refer to the fallen condition of humanity that affects every aspect of our existence: our thoughts, feelings and behavior. A vice is a character trait or pattern of behavior. It is evidence of the condition of Sin that in turn may led to the commission of various acts of sin.

Virtues and vices are moral qualities acquired over time. They are habits that can be developed or broken down through repeated actions. For example, if I want to develop the virtue of honesty then I need to tell the truth not just once or twice, or when it suits me, but consistently and repeatedly over time. Rebecca DeYoung, associate professor of philosophy at Calvin College, uses the analogy of a winter sledding party after freshly fallen snow:

The first sled goes down slowly carving out a rut. Other sleds follow, over and over, down the same path, smoothing and packing down the snow. After many trips a well-worn groove develops, a path out of which it is hard to steer. The groove enables sleds to stay aligned and on course, gliding rapidly, smoothly, and easily on their way. Character traits are like that: the first run down, which required some effort and tough going, gradually becomes a smooth track that one glides down without further intentional steering. Of courses a rider can always stick out a boot and throw the sled off course, usually damaging the track as well. So too we can act out of character, even after being "in the groove" for a long time. In general, however, habits incline us swiftly, smoothly and reliably toward certain types of action.¹

Vices are to be spurned because they lead to actions that destroy the soul and bring harm to individuals and society. Virtues are to be valued because they lead to actions that help us live well as human beings and bring good to individuals and society.

2. THE FRUIT OF FAITH

Unfortunately, for the first readers of Peter’s letter, certain teachers, who had insinuated themselves into the fellowship of the church, began to tell everybody that this was all nonsense. There was no need to worry about virtues and vices, no need to be concerned about rules and restraints. “Since Christ has forgiven us of all our sins,” they argued, “We are free to live as we please.”

If this group were around today they would say you can have Jesus as your Savior but not

¹Rebecca DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins*, p. 13.

necessarily have to acknowledge him as Lord. You can say a “sinner’s prayer” to receive Christ, have a guaranteed place in heaven, and live this life any way you please. Their theme song would go like this: “Free from the law, O blessed condition; We can sin all we want And still have remission.” But this is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.”

This letter we call 2 Peter was written to correct this gross distortion of the Gospel. Peter provides his readers a list of virtues, including self-control, in order to keep them from being, as he puts it:

“Unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (8).

It is true we are saved by faith alone as a gift from God.

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

But the faith which saves does not remain alone. Saving faith produces the fruits of righteousness. Righteousness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit at work in those who follow Christ. We are being made into the likeness of Christ. If our faith does not produce fruit it may be because we never really had faith to begin with.

3. THIRD VIRTUE: SELF-CONTROL

One of the evidences of a living faith is a measure of self-control, the third of the “Seven Lively Virtues.” The term here literally means “get a grip on yourself.” This is an expression we still use today when someone is on the verge of being overcome with passion or fear.

Ancient philosophers like Aristotle defined self-control as the ability to act entirely according to one’s own free will. It was to live your life without undue influence from other people’s opinions or one’s own emotions. The goal was self-mastery – to make decisions based one’s own best interests.

The problem with that is that our interests can lead us astray. We do not always want what is good. G. K. Chesterton, the famous mystery writer and Christian apologist, was asked by a British newspaper to contribute an essay on the subject, “What is wrong with the world.” Chesterton’s contribution was brief: “What is wrong with the world? Me.”

For the Apostle Peter the goal for self-control is not self-mastery but allowing God to be the master behind every decision we make, especially decisions that can be influenced by strong desire. Reading through the New Testament we find three examples where self-

control is invoked: breaking the marriage vow, excessive consumption of food and drink, and irrational religious fervor.

The first takes place when Paul discusses self-control in front of Felix and Drusilla who failed to exercise any self-control on their way to committing adultery (Acts 24:25). What is adultery? A kindergartner in a Sunday School class thought it meant, "...The sin of saying you're older than you really are!" ADULTery.

The most blatant act of adultery is having sexual relations with someone other than one's marriage partner. It is a betrayal of the vow of fidelity. It is also the most conspicuous example of our sexual brokenness. Sex is good and intended for good but it needs to be protected by marital commitment and faithfulness.

The second reference to self-control is found in the Letter to the Galatians (Gal 5:16-23). There it is seen as a contrast to the excesses of those who do not walk according to the Spirit of God. Such persons surrender to unrestrained self-indulgence and drunkenness. We need to understand that what God creates is good (Psalm 104:14-15) but voracious eating and drinking is wasteful, destructive and a form of rebellion against God (Deut 21:20).

The third reference is in connection with the confusion the Thessalonian Christians had concerning the return of Christ. They got so caught up in what they thought was the imminent return of Christ they gave up their jobs, property, and common sense behavior. Paul likened it to spiritual drunkenness (1 Thess 5:8). They were caught up in an intense experience without checking to see if it had any basis in fact. They allowed religious fervor to supercede reason.

Of course, Presbyterian Christians are not likely to commit this sin. If anything, we are guilty of allowing our commitment to reason to supercede any fervor – even the good kind. Not for naught have we been called "the frozen chosen" for the last 390 years.

The matter of self-control is further complicated by another facet of human nature known as rationalization. We are constantly looking for ways to rationalize or justify our (bad) behavior. Bitterness is a frequent context for this.

Bitterness affects our relationship to God and each other. It is not wrong to be angry, not even at God. But we must learn to turn our anger over to God. We must not take it back again and nurse it into bitterness. Bitterness, perhaps more than anything else, can lead even godly people to justify wrongful actions. Do not underestimate our fallen natures. We are constantly looking for excuses to disobey God and bitterness is one of the best. If I think God or church or family or government has let me down then I may use that to

claim the right to do something I would not normally do. The moral maxim is, “Two wrongs do not make a right.” But bitterness perverts that into, “The first wrong gives me the right!”

4. APPLICATION

In order to develop self-control we need to identify those things we use as excuses to abandon self-control. To put it another way:

What chips do you carry on your shoulder?

“Chip on the shoulder” is a figure of speech. It comes from the practice during the 19th Century of carrying a chip of wood on the shoulder and daring anyone to knock it off, spoiling for a fight. Nowadays it refers to a bad attitude that tends to get the person with the bad attitude easily upset. The person is just waiting for something to go wrong during the day so they can feel justified in behaving badly.

At first it may be subtle. For example, if you are on a diet and have a bad day you might say, “I’ve had a terrible day. I deserve a Big Mac and large order of fries!” (Been there. Done that!) The problem with that is that both your physical body and your fallen human nature enjoys what you just did and so it can escalate. You start hoping that tomorrow will also be a bad day, and the day after, and so on.

A Big Mac may seem trivial so let us apply the same principle to sexual temptation. More than half of the married men and more than a third of the married women in American society commit adultery at some time or another.² This is a disturbing piece of news. Now most people who commit adultery do not wake up in the morning and say, “Oh, what a wonderful day to commit adultery!” Rather, they talk themselves into it over time. They set up the proverbial “chip on the shoulder” and wait for their spouse to knock it off. Then they feel justified in finding comfort in the arms of another.

A crucial step in preventing this is to identify the “chip” and throw it away. This includes talking about what bothers you rather than bottling it up inside. It also includes surrendering your perceived right to retaliate, commonly known as forgiveness.

An essential second step is to seek God’s help. Consider this promise in the Book of Proverbs:

Like a city breached, without walls, is one who lacks self-control (Proverbs 25:28)

²Lewis Smedes, *Mere Morality*, p. 157.

NRSV).

The promise is not obvious, so let me explain. In ancient times, people discovered that a city with a protective wall was easier to defend. The wall did not guarantee safety but the absence of a wall meant certain defeat. Self-control works in a similar way. It needs barriers in order to resist temptation. The barriers are no guarantee of victory but the absence of barriers means self-control is lost from the start.

Examples of barriers would include: avoiding potentially compromising situations, confiding in a close friend or group of friends who can support you, knowing what your values are before they are tested, and setting limits ahead of time. The exact configuration of barriers will vary from individual to individual. The important thing is to ask for God's help with these barriers. A related verse from Psalms says:

“Unless the LORD guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain” (Psalm 127:1 NRSV).

Let the Lord guard your city.