

4 / An Ambition of Excellence

Adding Virtue to Faith

The Battle Against Spiritual Apathy

Then said Evangelist, “Keep that light in your eye, and go up directly thereto, so shalt thou see the gate; at which, when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do.”

So I saw in my dream that the man began to run.

From The Pilgrim's Progress

Supplementing our Faith

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue...

2 Peter 1:5a

Peter, after describing the salvation bestowed upon us through faith in the Son of God, **pushes us toward action**. And it is not half-hearted but rather nearly **desperate**, particularly considering the consequences of this pursuit (and the dire consequences of avoiding it) that are given just a few verses hence. The promises of success or declarations of potential failure in our faith ought to shake us a bit. Peter is not exaggerating.

*He implores **us** to make every effort to supplement our faith.*

The action is our own. It is something we must **do**. There remains plenty of verbiage in the New Testament instructing us in what God does in our justification and sanctification, but here, **the action is ours**. We must not avoid the action by shifting this responsibility to another.

We are to supplement! Ok, what does that mean?

The Greek word behind the English word supplement means “to provide at one’s own expense.” The idea here is that we have God’s salvation through faith freely given to us. On one level completed and done. And now, as saved ones, we are to add to it through our own pursuit (at our own expense) a number of qualities that supplement, or work with, our faith. As an engine has many components that work together to operate, so does our spiritual life. What does that expense look like? It looks like time, energy, effort, desire, and attention.

This listing gives us insights into how we are able to grow in our faith, or conversely, how not to be stuck in the mud of inaction. This is significant. Do we just grow as Christians without action? Maybe. Perhaps. But what happens when we cooperate with that process?

We should take a minute to speak of this listing of qualities that is now described, let's look at in total;

...supplement your faith with virtue, virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.

Notice that this is **not** just a list of qualities with no particular order; they are in succession, one allowing the other to spring into effect, a growing intentional cascade. This is very important as we try to figure out the meanings and applications of this passage. The order of these things is intentional. One building on the next.

Notice as well that the ultimate goal of this cascade is **love**. Not simply affection or friendship but God's enduring and supernatural kind of love. A love that springs from God himself. A love best pictured in the work of Jesus for his people. We often think we understand love, but I'm not sure we do. It's deeper, and more selfless, and looks much more like sacrifice than desire.

This push toward true love shows us that the goal of this whole enterprise is not self-fulfillment or self-improvement, but we are to improve for our heavenly Father for very specific goals and reasons, all of which need to be selfless, humble, even self-deprecating—in favor of God's ways and not our own—not out of selfish ambition, but for God, and through his ethic of humility and service.

Our first action of supplementing is supplementing **virtue** to our faith.

...With Virtue

This is the Greek word that is translated as “excellence” just a few verses before (see 2 Peter 1:3). It definitely has that idea.

Understanding its explicit meaning here is a bit difficult as how does “virtue” come before “knowledge.” Also, that concept of “moral excellence” is already expressed later on—and better and higher—in the passage by the term “**godliness**” which is more in line with what we think of as being excellent in behavior.

So this word **virtue** is to be understood to mean “uncommon character worthy of praise” and therefore not the presence of this, but the goal of this in our lives.

We need to supplement our faith **first** with the **desire to be excellent and virtuous**, and as elsewhere, we learn that the praise we should desire is from God alone. When this pursuit becomes the pursuit of praise from men, it turns ugly and even evil; when God is the one we choose to please, it becomes fragrant.

This is the “ambition” for spiritual progress, not the selfish ambition mentioned in Philippians 2, where we find the fix is authentic, Christ-like humility.

We need to “**want to**” **grow and become excellent** so our Heavenly Father might praise us. It is his “well done” we must desire, not the human and fleshly “atta boy.” The direction—whether earthly or heavenly— of this desire for excellence and praise **does** matter.

The Pharisees desired praise and excellence and were devoted to the Word of God — and it turned into the pursuit of mere men worshipping their own understanding and devotion to the “word” but removing God himself from the mix. A sad affair.

Some Barriers

There are many barriers to these things that are present in the hearts of men. First and foremost is the ugly **demon of pride**. It is the greatest of vices, and it greatly gets in the way of God’s intended work. “I don’t need to grow and pursue more, I am sufficient as I am.” “I am already above my peers.” “If I admit I don’t know something, I will look less.”

Such attitudes will hinder our growth.

Be prepared to humble yourselves before others. Be prepared to be “wrong.” Be prepared to apologize. Be prepared to consider others better than yourself.

There are many other types of barriers, possibly as many as there are people in the church; there is laziness, ignorance, apathy, distraction, and more.

You might want to ask yourself what your particular barriers are, barriers to desiring a better and stronger walk with God, and things that get in the way of a greater desire to pursue Him.

For the barrier of **pride** — dig deep in the well of Christ’s humility

For the barrier of **laziness** —come to Jesus because his burden is light
For the barrier of **apathy** — consider the Lord's passion on the cross
For the barrier of **distraction** — seek first the kingdom, ask for his help

It's hard for one person to change the heart of another. No, it's not hard, it's impossible.
However, I believe we can encourage and implore each other, but ultimately God has to do the work in our hearts, and we—on an individual level—need to respond.

If you are a believer and you have trusted Christ, the Holy Spirit who dwells in you can be the spark that start the engine of your heart and makes this sanctification process begin to hum. If there is no spark, perhaps there is no Spirit. Perhaps your heart is hard and needs to be softened.

What Might Adding Virtue to Faith Look Like?

The following are some of the word imagery that the New Testament writers use to describe their pursuit of the things of God, contextually after coming to faith in Christ, their journey is not over, thus they strive forward...

Seeking First / Matthew 6:33, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Hungering and Thirsting / Matthew 5:6, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

Pressing On / Philippians 3:14, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Fighting / Struggling / 1 Timothy 6:12, "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses."

Run the Race / 1 Corinthians 9:24, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it."

Athletic Struggles / 1 Timothy 4:8, "for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come."

Straining Forward / Philippians 3:13, "Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead..."

Holding On / Hebrews 6:18, "so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us."

What Kind of Exceptionalism? Pursue God's Exceptionalism, not Man's View of Exceptionalism

This is a critical question. Not all exceptionalism is exceptional. Wordly exceptionalism is good in the world but not much help in the realm of the Spirit. What is at stake here is deciding what God is like and becoming like him through Jesus; his attitudes, his character, his goals.

A careful reading of the scriptures will tell you that he doesn't have too much care for some of the things that we care for in excess. The people of God (sometimes after the corrective decrees of Jesus) were not so concerned with personal power, but in knowing and relying on his power. They were not concerned with outward appearances. There is little in the New Testament on personal wealth or finances, affluence, or external impressions. Paul was concerned with the heart.

What was valuable and powerful were the ideas of servanthood and becoming like the Servant.

These are the things you should pursue. A simple search for "pursue" in the New Testament yields the following.

- Pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding. **Romans 14:9**
- Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you prophesy. **1 Corinthians 14:1**
- "*Don't pursue money.*" **1 Timothy 6:6-10** / In Contrast, Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith. **1 Timothy 6:11-12**
- "*Don't pursue youthful passions.*" Rather, pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace. **2 Timothy 2:22**
- Turn away from evil, and seek peace and pursue it. **1 Peter 3:11**

Let's examine these pursuits a bit.

Pursue Peace / This pursuit is mentioned three times in the above verses! Pursue things that lead toward peace. Your opinions do not lead to peace. Your pet projects don't lead toward peace. Self-gratification does not lead to peace.

Peace is developed when men submit to God and seek his peace through the gospel and through living in the Spirit of God. Life in the flesh does not lead to peace. Life in God does bring peace. The Spirit and peace are linked in four separate passages in the New Testament (Romans 8:6, 14:17, Galatians 5:22, Ephesians 4:3).

Conversely, the *flesh* is responsible for all "enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, and divisions" (a partial list from Galatians 5:20).

Crucify the flesh, submit to the Spirit.

Do you pursue peace with other believers or control?

Pursue Love / This pursuit is also mentioned thrice. Love is not simply reached by the flesh either. It is also an outgrowth of the Spirit of God dwelling inside us as Christians. Christian love is more than just affection and familial care; it cuts deeper and further. Christian love is humble and sacrificial; it is expressed best in the person and work of Jesus.

Do you pursue love or in opposition to authentic love, personal agendas, influence, and personal power?

Pursue Spiritual Gifts / If you count the sentiment behind "mutual upbuilding in the Romans 14 passage, this segment is mentioned twice in the grouping above. Spiritual gifts are Spirit-empowered abilities designed to build up others. They are not for the bearer of the gift but for the benefit of others. Pursuing spiritual gifts means pursuing ministry to and with others. For their edification, not your own.

Do you pursue ministering (serving others) or servicing yourself?

Pursue Righteousness / This pursuit is mentioned twice as well. Righteousness in scripture is found in one person, in Jesus Christ. For the rest of us righteousness is

found in recognizing our sin, confessing it, and doing what God says we should do about it.

For the Old Testament saint, righteousness was found in living according to God's word, admitting to ourselves and others when we failed, confessing, repenting, sacrificing and making it right. In the New Testament it is similarly obtained. It is in recognizing our sin and trusting Jesus to be our righteousness. It is found in admitting our sin and confessing it to one another, in praying for one another and caring about each other in such deep, deep ways.

Righteousness is not lived directly, it is applied through repentance in Jesus.

Do you seek righteousness? Or do you seek self-righteousness?

Pursue Godliness / Much like the above pursuits, this one is found only in God. Godliness is granted to us through salvation, it is developed through training and discipleship, Peter admitted that his own "piety" was not the source of his power, but through the Spirit of God.

Surrender to the Spirit, live in the Spirit, keep in step with the Spirit and find that God's very nature will shine through your life.

Are you pursuing godly behavior, such as only the Spirit of God can deliver?

Pursue Faith / To believe, or in other contexts to be faithful, are both great Christian virtues. Belief comes through him. Faithfulness comes through him.

In some ways, the pursuit of faith describes our very lives -- to move ever closer to believing in what Jesus has done and is doing in our lives. We move through ever-challenging circumstances and need to trust God not just for his existence but that he knows what he is doing and is sovereign in the world and in our lives.

Do you trust God more and more each day? Are you relying on him to make things right where they are wrong?

Pursue Steadfastness / As Christians, we are to pursue patience and show fortitude in the face of the winds that often blow against the believer.

- The battle of the World with the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and pride of life.
- The battle of the Flesh with its desire for self-gratification and self-aggrandizement.
- The battle of the Devil challenging us to live a life contrary to or without the strings of the God of heaven.

If you intend to lead a godly life you will find opposition against you; from the culture without, even from within the church, from our families, and from our own hearts. Steadfastness is holding on as the pressure mounts.

Steadfastness should be pursued. Are you standing firm?

Pursue Gentleness / According to the BDAG, one of the most trusted lexicons of Greek scripture and early literature; this word means "the opposite of an overbearing attitude."

If we are pushing our weight around, or getting in each other's faces, manipulating one another -- even for what we think are good reasons -- we are doing it wrong.

Jesus himself was humble and gentle.

We need to pursue being gentle, letting the Spirit of God work in the lives of others, and not taking his place. He is the source of this gentleness. We are the source of our overbearing ways.

Do you pursue gentleness with others? Do you control yourself and your will so you do not push others around?

In contrast, these passages tell us that we should not pursue "money" or "youthful passions." Money is not the answer to the problems that plague our lives. Just fulfilling our fleshly desires is not the answer. Happiness and contentment in life are found in the pursuit of Godly things, in the pursuits that God himself commands us to undertake.

Join me in the pursuit of things that lead to life!

We might need to change our way of thinking and perhaps our very value system.

We can't expect others to change these things for us; we are responsible for these pursuits, and we are responsible before God alone.

God's Judgement For the Complacent

I have found myself to be complacent at different times. It's a real struggle.

It might help us see this somewhat soft-looking sin from other perspectives.

Notice the heart of the complacent mentioned in Zephaniah 1:12;

At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, '**The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill.**'

This pictures the Lord as one who wanders the streets with lamps looking for men of complacency. Stagnant. These are deceived because God is aware of them, and will repay them for their life and behavior in that life; See verse 1:3 for that recompense. What did their complacency look like?

The phrase **stagnant in spirit** is literally "thick in their sediment" and derives from an expression about wine that fermented too long so that it became thick or syrupy, and thus unpalatable. It indicates men who have become spiritually stuck, unmoved, unconcerned, and unaffected by the circumstances surrounding them. These say in their hearts, even as people say today, that **the Lord will not do good or evil**, meaning that God does not care what people do or how they live.¹

In other words, if we are to take seriously God's holiness and his constant interactions with our world we might have a different attitude. Do we see the influence we have on others? Do we see what are words and deeds, both positive and negative, have on people's hearts?

In contrast to this consider Paul's words in Ephesians;

For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,
"Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you."

1. Walter White Jr., "Zephaniah," in The Moody Bible Commentary, ed. Michael A. Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 1401.

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. **Ephesians 5:12–17 (ESV)**

The perspective here is that all things happen in the light. We would prefer that they happen in the dark and remain in the dark, but God knows all and all things happen in the light. It is implicit here that God does both notice and care what we do in our lives, and that he desires us "**awake**." We sometimes walk through our days like zombies with no point or goal, this is true for many of us. God would have us walk up and be "**wise**" in the way we walk, "**making the best use of time**." God exists, God cares, we ought to as well.

In one of the most thought-provoking passages in the scriptures, we see in the opening chapters of Revelation, we see the Lord Jesus critiquing the churches. Apathy is on full display in one of those seven letters.

“ ‘I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

Revelation 3:15–20 (ESV)

God sees and knows our hearts. He knows our passions and knows our apathy. He desires us to have a heart for him. When we fail we don't need to wallow in our failure, but confess our sin and let him wake us up. God desires us to do so. Consider his heart at the end of this passage, he desires to come in and have a friendship with him! He's just waiting for us to open that door. He is speaking about people who are already believers, people whose heart is far from him.

He is the light, he desires to shine on us. We need to wake up. He desires to eat with us and have fellowship with us, and we need to answer him when he knocks.

Let's wake up! As McCartney once said, "Someone's knocking at the door... do me a favor, open the door, let 'em' in."

How Do We Build A Desire for Exceptionalism into Our Hearts?

Be Inspired by Christ, Inspire Others to Know Christ

Our desire for exceptionalism comes from the most exceptional person in the universe. If we focus our eyes on him we cannot help catch his character and passion. I want to know him. I want to drown in the knowledge of him. I want to flood my heart with who he is and trust him for my salvation, and trust he will change my heart in the process.

The smaller our view of who he is, the smaller our vision and purpose becomes.

I would encourage you to dig into systematic theologies and delve into Christology; it answers that wonderful question: "Who is Jesus?" Read books like *The Incomparable Christ* by J. Oswald Sanders, or other Christ-centric studies. Be overwhelmed with his greatness.

Jesus is the very fulfillment of the Old Testament as proclaimed by the writers of the New Testament. He is the maker of the universe, and the servant of all. He is the Alpha and the Omega. He is the image of the invisible God. He is the substance of the shadows found in the most ancient of texts.

He desires to be the very purpose and motivation for your life, too.

Are You the Hero of Scripture or the Audience of Scripture

I find I'm less motivated when I read scripture as if I know it already, or I read it as if I'm already doing all this stuff.

When we read a book, the writer often has characters that we can relate to. This helps us get into the story and be an active part of it in our imagination. When we read *The Lord of the Rings*, we find ourselves being dragged into this great epic like we were hobbits ourselves. This is right and good.

When we read scripture we who have been a part of the church for a long time read it in such a way as we feel like we should be relating to Paul or Jesus and we see ourselves as "like the apostle" and therefore not the audience of the message but the messenger itself.

Scripture is not meant to be read that way. Pastors get that in their minds sometimes, and it's dangerous. The Bible is a revelation to us from God, not our book, that we are relating to others. We are part of the audience. When the Bible tells us to "love one another," we are not to look at that primarily as if he's saying, "Yeah, guys, you ought to love one another," but rather think of the scripture as being spoken directly to you, "I ought to love others."

Pastors are not the only ones susceptible to this misplaced attitude of pride.

I am not necessarily the hero of the story but one of the supporting characters and perhaps, at times, one of the antagonists. Reading it in this way makes it come alive, or better yet, makes us wake up and listen and apply. It is harder on our egos, but more helpful for our souls.

The Pharisees were great examples of this in the negative sense; they thought they were the lords, and the people were the rabble that needed their greater wisdom. But they were but the blind leading the blind.

Take Small Steps and Grow A Little

Don't attempt to make all your Christian growth in one fell swoop. Pick a small goal and focus on it.

Take a small goal like "I want to learn deeply what Jesus said about prayer and emulate it in my prayer life. Focus on that. Think about it. Pray about it. Research it.

Learn to do it even in an imperfect way.