

## 2 Peter 1:8-11

### Introduction

My brothers and sisters:

“[Christ’s] divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and piety, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and virtue, by which He has granted to us His precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

And **so for this very reason, bringing all your energy to bear**, supply by your faith, an abundance of moral excellence, and [supply] by [your] moral excellence, an abundance of knowledge, and [supply] by [your] knowledge, an abundance of self-control, and [supply] by [your] self-control, an abundance of steadfastness, and [supply] by [your] steadfastness, an abundance of piety, and supply by [your] piety, an abundance of brotherly affection, and [supply] by [your] brotherly affection, an abundance of love.”

Don’t those words arrest your attention this morning? Sometimes I look at my introductions, and I question if they even have the right to be called introductions. In college, I remember learning in my homiletics (preaching) class about how introductions were to be “attention getting,” meaning they should include a story, or an illustration, or a real-life anecdote, or something of that sort. But I’ve come to see and to believe that for those of us who are born again new creations by the Spirit the Scriptures themselves arrest and compel our attention. I learned also at college about using “illustrations” and anecdotes (not necessarily *examples*) for keeping and maintaining attention. But I’ve come to believe and am fully convinced that the Scriptures themselves have a power and a beauty in them to keep and maintain the attention of God’s holy people. I’ve come to believe that the Scriptures themselves are sufficient—without props and aids—to feed and to abundantly satisfy God’s redeemed people. This also keeps me honest as I must make sure that the Scriptures have first of all grabbed and arrested my own heart. Always remember that you have not come to hear me – or to hear anyone who stands behind this pulpit – but to hear the Word of God. That might sound simplistic, but it’s actually revolutionary and profound. And always remember by faith that this Word that you’ve come to hear, when it’s applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit, has a power within itself to change us and to transform us and to sanctify us and fit us for God’s presence.

Two weeks ago, we saw how it’s because of *Christ’s* divine power and *His own* glory and virtue and *His* precious and very great promises that *we* must bring all of *our* energy to bear and labor and toil to abundantly supply the following virtues in our lives: moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, piety, brotherly affection, and love. Peter wants to motivate us to Gospel living through the powerful realities of the salvation that is already ours. Now this morning we’re going to see that Peter would also motivate us to Gospel living by setting before us the hope of a salvation that it still remains for us to inherit. No sooner has Peter completed his

list of virtues which perfectly sum up for us the practical living of the practical Christian life, than he goes on to say this:

**I. 2 Peter 1:8** — For when **these things** belong to you and are abounding more and more, they make you neither useless nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

How do these words impact you? How do they make you feel? On the one hand, these words are meant to encourage us because who here would ever want to be described as useless and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ? And yet, on the other hand, it's clear that these words are mainly meant to be a caution and a warning. Peter could have emphasized what we will be – we'll be *useful* and *fruitful*; but instead, he emphasizes what we *won't* be. We see from this verse that there are only two options: *Either* all seven of these virtues already belong to us and are already abounding more and more in our lives *or* else we can only be described as *useless* and *unfruitful* in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now how can Peter talk like this? How can anyone be useless and unfruitful *in* the true saving knowledge of Jesus Christ? Is that even possible? Some think it is, and so they lull themselves—or others—into a false security. But we're going to see in these verses that Peter's point is exactly the opposite. "Useless" is a pretty sobering word, isn't it? In James, it can even be translated "worthless."

□ **James 2:20** — Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is **useless [worthless]**?

"Unfruitful," on the other hand, might not sound so bad to us. It might seem more "neutral." But an unfruitful "Christian" in the Bible is the very same thing as a useless "Christian."

□ **Matthew 13:22** — As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves **unfruitful**.

□ **Jude 12 (cf. Eph. 5:11)** — [The false teachers are] waterless clouds, swept along by winds; **fruitless** trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted.

Brothers and sisters, to be useless and unfruitful in the knowledge of Jesus Christ should be a fearful and scary thought because it would reveal that we don't truly "know" Christ at all. To be useless and unfruitful means that we're like a dead and withered tree and that in the end we'll fall all the way from our lofty profession of Christ into the eternal pit of hellfire and destruction. Here's a second reason, then, why Peter exhorts us to bring all our energy to bear and to abundantly supply this list of virtues in our lives. We have not only Gospel promises, but also Gospel warnings. "For **when these things** belong to you and are abounding more and more, **they** make you neither useless nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" – and that's precisely what we don't want to be and what we must not be!

Are you seeing how Peter assumes that these virtues do already belong to all true Christians?—Because that's the *only* other alternative there is to being useless and unfruitful. If you're a Christian, then you do, already, possess these virtues. But Peter *also* assumes that by the

very nature of these virtues, they *will be* always abounding more and more in the life of every *true* Christian. Think about it! How can you truly possess moral excellence without that moral excellence always abounding more and more? How can you truly possess an experiential knowledge of the will of God without that knowledge always abounding more and more? How can we truly possess self-control and steadfastness and piety and brotherly affection and love without these virtues always abounding more and more in our Christian life? But that's exactly Peter's point: It's *not* possible. Having the virtue *at all* will *always* lead to that virtue abounding more and more. Peter isn't saying that all true Christians are perfect, otherwise he couldn't talk about abounding more and more. But on the other hand, Peter is clear that there's no such thing as a true Christian who lacks even one of these virtues – moral excellence, knowledge, self control, steadfastness, piety, brotherly affection, and love. The true Christian hasn't attained perfection in all of these virtues, but in some way he *does* already possess them all and he *is* always possessing them more and more in increasing measure.

The point of “abounding more and more” is not progress that we can measure and calculate, but rather an ever increasing, overflowing abundance of a kind that utterly defies being measured or calculated (cf. Schreiner). Brothers and sisters, when all of the Christian virtues belong to you and when they're all abounding more and more in your life, they make you neither useless nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**II. 2 Peter 1:9** — For whoever does not have **these things** is blind—being diseased in his eyes—having forgotten the cleansing of his former sins.

Notice how Peter keeps on assuming that every true *Christian* already possesses all of these virtues (because these are the *Christian* virtues) – “Whoever does not have these things” – *all* of these things. Peter isn't denying “progressive sanctification” or that we're all at different places in having our “powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14). But Peter is denying that there's such a thing as a Christian who doesn't possess all of these virtues and who is not always abounding in them more and more.

To be blind is to be spiritually ignorant. To be blind is to lack any capacity at all to truly discern and understand and live out experientially the will of God. To be blind is to be wholly unable to truly see “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). To be blind, Peter says, is to have forgotten the cleansing of our former sins. When we think of forgetting we usually think of something accidental, but Peter's point is that this forgetting is willful. We could translate, “Having ignored, or having disregarded, or having willfully chosen to forget, the cleansing of his former sins.” But how can any true Christian be blind? How can any true Christian willfully forget and ignore the cleansing of his former sins? That's just Peter's point. To “forget” the cleansing of one's former sins is not truly to have been cleansed at all.

Brothers and sisters, to be spiritually blind is a fearful thing. To forget the cleansing from our *former* sins by *returning* to those sins and by not possessing all of the Christian virtues is to reveal that we don't truly know Christ at all and that in the end we will fall all the way from our lofty profession of Christ into the eternal pit of hell fire and destruction. So here again we see why Peter exhorts us so earnestly to bring all our energy to bear and to abundantly supply the

Christian virtues in our lives. There are not only Gospel promises, but also Gospel warnings. “For whoever does not have **these things** is blind—being diseased in his eyes—having forgotten [or disregarded] the cleansing of his former sins.”

The word cleansing is used throughout the Old and New Testaments for ceremonial cleansing and so it almost certainly refers here to the waters of baptism which symbolize the inward cleansing of the heart. To disregard our baptism and the cleansing that it represented by returning to the sin of our *former* life and by failing to abound more and more in every Christian virtue is to reveal that our baptism was a lie and to trample on the very Christ that we profess. It is to fall from grace to eternal destruction (cf. Gal. 5:4).

**III. 2 Peter 1:10** — Therefore, brothers, be all the more zealous to confirm your calling and election, for as long as you do **these things** you will most certainly never fall.

On the one hand, our salvation is wholly rooted in God’s free and sovereign grace – in God’s “calling and election.” Remember that this divine calling is not just an invitation, but a powerful irresistible summons to which we have all freely responded in faith. And this powerful, irresistible summons is the working out in real time of God’s own unconditional choice before the foundation of the world – before we had faith and before we had ever done anything, either good or bad.

And yet within the context of God’s free and sovereign grace, *we* must confirm or establish our calling and election by doing these things – by possessing every Christian virtue (moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, piety, brotherly affection, and love) so that they’re *all* always abounding more and more in our lives. Peter’s point is not that by doing these things we’ll be subjectively assured that our calling and election is real. His point is that by doing these things we will actually confirm and establish—or, as it were, *complete*—our calling and election. Hasn’t Peter already told us that our calling and election is *unto* a godly and pious life? A “calling” that we haven’t confirmed by a life possessing every Christian virtue is actually no calling at all. An “election” that we haven’t established with a life in which all of the Christian virtues are always abounding more and more is actually no election at all. “Therefore, brothers, be all the more zealous to confirm and establish your calling and election...”

That word for “zealous” is the same word that Peter used in verse five when he said, “And so for this very reason, bringing all your energy to bear, supply by your faith an abundance of moral excellence...” Once again, Peter is calling us to go to great lengths, to expend all of our energy and effort, to leave nothing on the table in toiling and laboring to be always abounding more and more in every Christian virtue. In verse five, Peter exhorted us mainly on the grounds of a salvation that we’ve already been given (gospel promises). Here in verse ten, Peter exhorts us to this same diligent effort mainly on the grounds of a salvation that we have not yet received (gospel warning). “Therefore, brothers, be all the more zealous to confirm your calling and election, **for as long as you do these things you will most certainly never fall.**”

Brothers and sisters, to “fall,” here, is a reference to falling finally and irrevocably *from* a profession of Christ *into* eternal ruin. One commentator paraphrases like this: For as long as you

do these things “you will avoid the disaster of not reaching final salvation (Bauckham). Notice, again, how there are only two options set before us. In verse eight, one *either* possesses all of the Christian virtues already so that they are always abounding in him more and more *or* else he is useless and unfruitful in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. In verse nine, one *either* possesses every Christian virtue already *or* he is spiritually blind, diseased in his eyes, having willfully disregarded his baptism and cleansing from his former sins. And now in verse ten Peter says that one is *either* zealously confirming his calling and election by laboring to abound more and more in every Christian virtue *or* he will most certainly fail to attain final salvation, and instead fall in the end to his eternal ruin. “The ethical [practical] fruits of Christian faith are objectively necessary for the attainment of final salvation” (Bauckham).

□ Hebrews 12:14 — Strive for... the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Peter would not have us deceive ourselves with the lie of any kind of neutral ground. Peter would remind us that it's *either* this *or* that, and that we must never believe the lie that we can be “safe” somewhere in the middle. The options are clear and stark, and there are only two. “Therefore, brothers, be all the more zealous to confirm and to establish your calling and election, **for as long as you do these things** you will most certainly never fall.” We know that the danger Peter refers to here is the danger of falling to our own eternal ruin because of what he contrasts this danger with in verse eleven:

**IV. 2 Peter 1:11** — For in this way [in doing these things] there will be richly provided to you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

My brothers and sisters! Can you imagine? Don't these words stir your heart and fill you with hope and joy? Don't these words motivate you to labor and strive in order that you may be constantly abounding more and more in all of the Christian virtues? Because it's *only* as we thus labor and strive with all diligence and zeal that there will be richly provided to us an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The point here isn't rewards. Peter isn't saying that some will be granted a better welcome than others or that some will be granted entrance into the kingdom just by the “skin of their teeth.” Peter's point is that there's only one kind of entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and that's the one that God Himself richly provides to all those who were zealous and diligent to confirm their calling and election by a life that was always abounding more and more in Christian virtue. And so we see that Peter begins and ends these verses with the lavish, free, wholly unmerited riches of God's grace. Just as our already completed salvation—our justification through faith in Christ—is all of God's grace, so also our future salvation and welcome into Christ's eternal kingdom will be all of God's grace.

## Conclusion

What Peter's been dealing with in these verses are matters of eternal significance. If we fail to confirm our calling and election by our possession of every Christian virtue and by these virtues always abounding more and more in our lives, then we will most certainly fall in the end from

our profession of Christ into eternal destruction and ruin. This is no peripheral matter. This is not a list of optional virtues. This is about things that are *necessary* to the inheritance of final salvation. So now please bear with me as I ask a foolish question: Do you think in treating of a matter so important, Peter has left out any key ingredient? Has Peter left any blanks that need to be filled in by others? I want to draw our attention once more to the reality that Peter very carefully avoids all examples and “practical application” (at least “of the kind” that we often think of today). He lists the Christian virtues, but then goes no further. Why is this? Was it to keep his letter shorter? Certainly that’s not a sufficient reason when dealing with matters of one’s eternal destiny. Was it because Peter expected others to supply what he himself had left out? Certainly, this would be the worst kind of laziness and utter delinquency on Peter’s part. Nevertheless, we hear of these virtues that are so essential to the inheriting of final salvation and we want Peter—or someone(!)—to tell us exactly *how* to possess these virtues and *how* they can be always abounding in our lives more and more. Brothers and sisters, I would warn us today that this is a very foolish desire, for this is always the sign of legalism – it either flows from legalism or leads inevitably *to* legalism. To ask Peter to tell us “how” would be to miss Peter’s point entirely – and, ultimately, the point of all of Scripture. Peter’s point is that as Christians we already possess these virtues and therefore we already have the ability to **find out for ourselves (EXPERIENTIALLY)** “how” to abound in them more and more. If Peter had given us examples and illustrations of moral excellence (all that elicits and calls forth the highest praise from God and men) he would have reduced moral excellence to a list of rules and left some of us smug in our fulfillment of these rules and others despairing under the burden of these rules. The same thing applies to all the virtues in Peter’s list. We can explain that the *meaning* of self-control is that we not be governed and ruled by our desires (which we did), and we can explain that self-control must be exercised in *every* area, including the areas of sexuality and food and social media, etc. (which we did), but to go beyond this in biblical teaching and preaching and to give examples of what self-control looks like in each of these areas would be to reduce self-control to a list of rules and leave some of us smug in our fulfillment of these rules and others despairing under the burden of these rules. It is *enough* to know that we are not ever in any way to be governed by our desires but *instead* that in every part of our lives we are to be always *abounding* in self-control. Think about it: How could Peter give examples of *abounding more and more* in self-control? How could Peter give examples of *abounding more and more* in piety, and steadfastness, and brotherly affection, and love? “Abounding more and more” in these virtues, by the very nature of things, defies any attempt to tell us *how* (unless we would simply repeat the Ten Commandments and their new covenant interpretation) and instead calls upon all of us to spend our lives **finding out** how in the experiential, day-to-day living of our lives. But remember, this finding out “how” is *not* the gaining of a new piece of knowledge, but rather the joyful *experience* of true obedience. It’s the process of having our “powers of discernment trained **by constant practice** to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14). “Practical application”—as we think of it today—is what **we** discover for ourselves **by constant practice** – it is never what we are given in the Scriptures or in the teaching and preaching of God’s Word.

Brothers and sisters, the truth is that I purposefully avoid “practical applications” in biblical teaching and preaching as a matter of personal moral conviction — and because I’m truly convinced that this is for your ultimate joy and good. To put it simply, *by today’s standards*, the Bible itself has *no* “practical application” (cf. no equivalent of the OT case laws in the NT). And

so the prevailing mindset of today is that it's the job of biblical teaching and preaching to provide what the Bible failed to give to God's people. But it's this kind of thinking that subtly and yet dangerously undermines the sufficiency of Scripture. How I long for us to see that when it comes to biblical teaching and preaching – and also to simply reading the Bible – the Scriptures themselves have already included in black and white on the written page *all* of the “practical application” that we shall ever need.

But then what about the nitty gritty putting it *into* practice in every situation and in every part of our own lives. “*How* do we do this?” Why doesn't *the Bible* answer this question? This is where we need to take heart. The Bible assures us that *if* we are bringing all our energy to bear, and *if* we are zealously toiling and laboring to this end, and *if* this truly is our desire, then we will always be successful in discerning what God's will is in every situation and in every part of our lives – in other words, we will always be successful in experientially discerning and finding out “*how*.”

□ **James 1:5–8** — If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

None of this is to say that in a more personal one-on-one setting or in a context of biblical counseling we cannot learn from one another's experiences or *help* each other to discern *experientially* the moral will of God **in a specific situation**. Biblical one-anothering and biblical counseling is a powerful tool and resource that God gives to us (and I—and the elders—are always available for biblical counsel), but this is not the role and indeed it should not and cannot be the role of **biblical** teaching and preaching.

Remember, again, *why* I bring these things up here. If we don't understand these things, we'll have no other choice but to believe that the Scriptures—and specifically Peter here in these verses—have not fully equipped us with all that is necessary for the attaining of final salvation. But brothers and sisters, if only I could assure you today that they *have*, and that all we need today is the *explaining* of these Scriptures and the *declaring* of their truth and beauty and the *pressing home* of these Scriptures to our hearts in earnest exhortation. I believe that strictly following this rule in biblical teaching and preaching, neither supplementing the Scriptures with “practical applications” nor detracting from the Scriptures in any way, is the key to avoiding both legalism *and* license. This is the key to actually producing in us the unspeakable joy of true holiness.

Let us simply believe that the Scriptures know better what we truly need than we know ourselves, and that in giving us exactly what we need, the Scriptures themselves are also wholly sufficient. We see, then, that Peter lists seven virtues which perfectly define and sum up for us the practical living of the practical Christian life – moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, piety, brotherly affection, and love. Peter warns us that if we don't possess these virtues and if they're not always abounding more and more in our lives, then we'll fail to attain

final salvation and fall from grace to our own eternal destruction. Given this dire reality, it's of the utmost significance that Peter himself never gives us any details on how to implement these virtues in our lives. Instead, he spills the vast majority of his ink seeking to impart to us Gospel teaching and Gospel motivation. Peter assumes (with all the rest of the New Testament writers) that the problem his readers face is *not* a lack of knowledge ("I don't know how"), but sin, and that the teaching and preaching of the Gospel is the *only* solution to this problem. This is what explains why the New Testament is constantly giving us Gospel motivation – Gospel promises, Gospel warnings, and Gospel exhortations. By *this* definition, the Bible is full to the brim and even overflowing with practical application. Peter says: "And **so for this very reason**, bringing all your energy to bear, supply by your faith an abundance of moral excellence, [etc.]... **for** when these things belong to you and are abounding more and more... you will most certainly never fall... [but instead] there will be richly provided to you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." I believe Peter really, honestly believed that when he had said this, he had said "enough." Consider two verses in chapter three. Peter writes:

□ **2 Peter 3:11** — Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness...?

What sort of people, indeed!—We ask. What sort of lives, indeed! Peter clearly assumes that every single one of his readers—motivated by the Gospel truth of the coming end—is fully able to find out and discover this for him or herself *in the day to day living of their lives*. Peter writes again:

□ **2 Peter 3:14** — Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.

But do we at this point need a message on *how* to be found by Him without spot or blemish and at peace? Once again, Peter boldly assumes that all of us—motivated by the Gospel truth of a coming new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells—are fully equipped to find this out for ourselves through constant practice in the day to day living of our lives.

Parents, if I could encourage you to do one thing in your "Bible times" or your "family devotions" it would be to eliminate all "practical applications" (of the kind that we think of today). Fathers, read the plain, unadorned Scriptures to your children—from Genesis to Revelation—by faith. Constantly teach your children the law (the Ten Commandments) by which we come to see ourselves as guilty sinners. Constantly give your children the Gospel – the revelation of God and the only way of salvation, Gospel promises, Gospel warnings, and Gospel exhortations to a life that possesses and is always abounding in every Christian virtue. Exhort your children to live each day always laboring with joy to find out for themselves what this will look like from moment to moment. Encourage them that when this is truly what they desire, they will—guaranteed—be successful in coming to *know* through experience and constant practice what the will of God is. And then in the daily living of life with your children there will always be opportunities for biblical counsel and for helping them from our own experiences of sin and failure and grace and victory to discern *in specific situations* what the will of the Lord is.



I say “communicate these things to your children,” but in communicating to our children we must constantly be reminded ourselves of the same things. **Be** the kind of man or woman who will raise your children so that by God’s grace they may embrace the “kind” of Christianity that loves to read *all* of the word of God, and that loves to hear the unadorned preaching of *that* beautiful and powerful word. Communicate *this* biblical Christianity to your children! And may they, with us, one day be richly provided an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.