

Make the Effort
2 Peter 1:1-11
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Before I moved back home I was living in Abbotsford BC in a 735 square foot condo where the flowers always bloomed, the grass was always green, the snow was always shovelled, and there was never a weed to be found. Aside from the sound of an edge trimmer at 6 o'clock in the morning, the grounds keeping was magical, and from my perspective, effortless.

Since moving back to Lethbridge I've been living in my parent's home. It's a lovely bungalow on a corner lot with a well developed yard and a flower garden and a pond with a waterfall, and for this lazy indoor cat it requires much more effort than I am currently giving it. A good number of flowers have given up for my lack of watering, half of the green in the lawn is a result of dandelion leaves rather than grass, and there is a mysterious creature with a voracious appetite munching away at the rose bushes, which I have yet to discover, but no doubt has massive jaws. Now, don't get me wrong, I am so very grateful for the privilege of being able to live in this house with all its lovely space inside and out for hosting friends and family. It provides opportunities that my tiny apartment never could, but it does require much more work to keep it clean and properly maintained, and I have to confess, I don't always make the effort.

In keeping the faith, the early church at times struggled to make the effort as well, and out of concern Peter wrote a letter to address the issue. We are in 2 Peter this morning and the reason behind Peter's concern comes out in the second and third chapters. He says,

... there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord... ..In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. (2 Pet. 2:1, 3)

He describes them as,

... reveling in their pleasures while they feast with you. With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed... (2 Pet. 2:13-14)

And finally he gets to the crux of the matter:

Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. ...you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' [Jesus] promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." (2 Pet. 3:1-4)

So it seems some people from inside the Christian community were spreading doubt of Christ's return, and not only doubt that he was coming back, but doubt that he was even God. Life hadn't seemed to change at all since Jesus, so some people were questioning why they should continue to put their faith in him?

It's not hard to see how these scoffers could have influence. Life in the first and second century Grecco/Roman world was harsh. Cities were crowded and dirty, torn by murderous racial tension, and often under threat from plague, fire, earthquake, and flood. One fifth of the population was enslaved and had little or no legal status. They were regarded as property and were often abused physically and sexually. Adultery and prostitution were commonplace and children were often unwanted due to the added burden of providing for them. It was not uncommon to abort them or leave them outside to die by exposure. People sought distraction from life through food, sex, alcohol, and violent circuses or the gladiators' ring. There was a general sense of helplessness and hopelessness about life.

Some looked to the divine for help. They longed for a connection with something beyond the struggles of their existence, but people felt that their gods were growing increasingly distant, so it was not uncommon for people to devote themselves to multiple gods, religions, or philosophical schools in search of a connection with the transcendent and the hope of a better afterlife.

So, it is in this context that Peter writes his letter with an attempt to remind Christ followers that Jesus is the true God.

He begins:

Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours: Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. (1 Pet. 1:1-2)

Even in this opening greeting we can see Peter taking the opportunity to correct false teaching. He deliberately links the name of Jesus with God, twice, affirming the divinity of Jesus, calling him Saviour and Lord. And the blessing he gives is through the knowledge of God or more precisely translated through the *true* knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. He is saying, true connection with God is found not through just any god, but through Jesus.

Peter underlines the divinity of Christ once more in verse 3 saying not just "His power", but "His *divine* power has given us everything we need for a godly life. And everything we need for a godly life is found in our knowledge of Jesus. Peter describes Jesus in direct contrast to the false teachers and their immoral characters, saying we have been called to a godly life by Jesus who is not corrupt, but good and

worthy of glory. And it is through his glory and goodness that he has given us promises. What are the promises of Jesus?

Jesus promises to be with us. He said:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. (John 14:16-20)

He promises freedom from sin:

Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin. (Acts 13:38-39)

He promises eternal life:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

If people longed for connection with the transcendent and hope of a better afterlife, Peter reminds them that it is found right here, through these promises: the presence of the Holy Spirit, freedom from sin, and eternal life. It's through these that you may participate in the divine nature and escape corruption in the world caused by evil desires. This is salvation.

Because Jesus is God, because he's good and not corrupt, because he promises his presence through the Holy Spirit, forgiveness of sin, and eternal life, and because you know him, for this very reason, Peter calls the believers to:

make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. (2 Pet. 1:5-7)

What's fantastic about this list is its order. Not the order of the virtues themselves, but that these virtues come after the promises of God. They don't lead to salvation, but come after salvation. Peter doesn't say, "Get your life in order if you want God to be with you", or "You've got to clean up your act to be forgiven", or "It's your level of virtue that will secure your place in heaven". No, he reminds believers that God is already with them, they are already forgiven, their eternal life is secured, not by their goodness, but by Christ's glory and goodness. This is where they have put their faith and the virtues are to be added to that faith to come as a response to what Christ has done for them. It's like the "working out of our salvation" that Paul talks about in his letter to the Philippians:

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus...

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. (Phil. 2:1-5, 12-13)

Peter has more to say about why we should make every effort to add to our faith.

Verse 8:

For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 1:8)

We need to make every effort to add to our faith so that we will be effective and productive in our knowledge of Jesus Christ. These qualities: goodness, knowledge, (especially spiritual knowledge), self-control, perseverance, mutual affection (or kindness), and love come from the character of Christ.

We know him as the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11)

He displayed spiritual knowledge right from a young age when his parents found him listening to the temple Rabbis:

Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. (Luke 2:47)

His self control is evident throughout his trial before Pilate:

The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.”⁵ But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed. (Mark 15:3-5)

He persevered unto death:

In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him. (Mark 15:31-32)

He showed kindness to all:

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” (Matt. 9:14)

And sacrificial love:

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. (Matt. 16:21)

To possess these qualities increasingly is to know Jesus. Not just know about him intellectually, but to become like him in character. In other words, to grow in them means they need to be practiced, like a skill. If you're not practicing them, you effect nothing; you produce nothing.

I started practicing piano when I was 7 and kept taking lessons all the way through university. In fact, I graduated with Bachelor of Music degree in piano performance. By the end of my degree I was spending 6 hours a day in the practice room getting Scarlatti, Liszt, and Stravinsky ready for my graduation recital. And after it was all done I decided, that was enough. I'd spent 16 years practicing the piano every day and I wanted to do something different, so after I graduated I just stopped practicing all together. It's been 22 years and I can still play a little bit, but I don't really practice, certainly not 6 hours a day. I can't call myself a pianist. I can say, I play the piano, but I'm no longer a really effective or productive musician, I'm no longer a pianist.

Peter wants believers to make every effort to add to their faith so they will be effective and productive in their knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The other reason he wants believers to make every effort to add to their faith is so they will remember that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

I love to do community theatre and my favorite role that I've had the chance to play is the Wicked Witch of the West in the Wizard of Oz. Now, if you remember, Dorothy travels to Oz in a dream and the characters who live in Oz come from her real life. The Wicked Witch and Dorothy's annoyed neighbour, Miss Gultch, are played by the same actor. Miss Gultch becomes the Wicked Witch in the land of Oz. Before Dorothy heads to Oz, Miss Gultch shows up on her bicycle to complain about Dorothy's dog, Toto. So at the beginning of rehearsals I was asked if I could ride a bicycle. Yes, of course I can ride a bicycle. I hadn't ridden a bicycle in years, but I thought it's like, literally, riding a bike. Well, let me tell you, that phrase, has no basis in reality. My bike riding skills were so bad, I wasn't even allowed to walk the bike onto stage. It was cut entirely. Miss Gultch was left to **march** onto stage with indignation if not humiliation. The idiom that *is* true is "If you don't use it, you lose it." I thought that I knew how to ride a bike, but because I wasn't practicing, I forgot.

The second reason Peter wants believers to make every effort to add to their faith is so that they will remember that they have been cleansed from their past sins, because whoever does not have these qualities in increasing measure is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed.

Peter concludes this section saying:

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 1:10-11)

To confirm calling and election, to confirm faith in Christ, is to practice the virtues, to live differently than the scoffers. “If you do these things, you will never stumble.” Is it really true that if we are growing in the virtues, we will *never* stumble? I wonder if this is meant to be read as an exaggerated description rather than a literal promise. Like we would say “I never see you at work.” and “I’m always here.” We most likely will stumble, but when our faith is in Jesus and we remember he is with us, he forgives us, and has promised us eternal life, we can get up again when we do stumble, ask for that forgiveness, and keep building upon our faith so we will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It’s not about being perfect. The welcome is already there as we put our faith in Jesus. A rich welcome is there when we make every effort to grow in the qualities that colour God’s kingdom. When we step into our roles as members of God’s kingdom.

Though Peter was writing to the early church, his words are still valuable for us today. As I read about the world of the first century Christian with its overcrowded cities, people taking advantage of one another, preoccupation with sex and violence, and frequent natural disasters, it didn’t sound so different from our world today. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed by it all and wonder myself when is Jesus coming again and if I’m honest, I wonder if he’s coming again. Why should we make every effort to build upon our faith?

Heading home from work, Jared Nied boarded his New York subway train at 42nd Street as he always did, but was confronted this evening with an ugly sight. The car’s windows and posters were covered in anti-Semitic graffiti. Messages like “Jews belong in the oven, destroy Israel, and Heil Hitler,” had been written over subway maps and swastikas were drawn in permanent marker on the doors and windows. It was pretty quiet in the car. His reaction to the graffiti, was written all over his face. A lady sitting across from him said, ‘Oh that’s absolutely horrible. Do you think there’s any way we can erase it?’” Many times, Jared had used a Sharpie when he had meant to use a dry-erase marker, and he knew from experience that alcohol would erase the graffiti. A light bulb went on, and he asked, “Does anyone have hand sanitizer?” He’d never seen so many people simultaneously reach into their bags and pockets looking for tissues and Purell. Within about two minutes, all the Nazi symbolism was gone. The episode had lasted less than five minutes and the passengers were able to erase the graffiti before the train reached 96th Street.

Why should we make every effort to build upon our faith? Because the world can be pretty terrible and our faith can grow dim, but if we can infuse a bit of goodness into that faith we might find ourselves with a new perspective. Adding self-control to that knowledge we may find ourselves persevering in new ways, developing a deeper reverence for God, showing kindness to those around us and ultimately spreading love. Practicing the virtues is not just about preparing us for a future eternity, but about transforming our own hearts and the world around us here and now.

So is it worth it to weed the garden, to practice the piano, to keep riding your bike? If you want flowers to bloom, songs to be sung, or to travel the world, it's worth it. Is it worth it to make every effort to build upon your faith? If you want to have an effect and produce change in your own heart and the world around you, make the effort.