

HOW CAN WE MATURE IN A CORRUPT WORLD?

SERIES: LIVING GODLY IN A CORRUPT WORLD

by Ron R. Ritchie

I want to share with you a truly amazing story I heard from a friend just recently. A certain man living in another city struggled with his sexual identity for many years. He felt that deep inside he *was* actually a woman imprisoned in a man's body. Finally, after years of wrestling with this confusion, he underwent a sex-change operation and took on the identity of a woman. His wife and two children were devastated. They refused to have anything to do with him. The man moved to another city and got a job. Some Christians there befriended him and when he sought to move to this area they arranged for him to move in with a Christian family.

Knowing all the facts about him, this family of four took him in to live with them. They reached out to him in love and sought ways to serve him. The man was so taken by their love and acceptance that within three weeks of his *moving in with* them he had become a Christian. He found a copy of *Authentic Christianity* by Ray Stedman and read it 13 times! He decided to submit himself again to surgery, reverse the operation and resume his life as a man. My friend told me that one day shortly after his conversion this man placed a Bible on his head and exclaimed, "I wish I could understand all of this truth at once! I am so hungry to know all that God has to teach me." This man is now working in this community, having been hired by a Christian who also knows the man's background. He is seeking to reconcile with his wife. His son wants to live with him, but his older daughter is struggling with the whole situation.

Truly we are living in a corrupt society, and it will remain so because ever since the Fall, men". . . did not honor God, or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools" (Romans 1:21,22). But thanks be to God, that is not the end of the story, for Ephesians tells us, "God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, made us alive together with Christ." By grace, Christians are saved from sin, saved from the wrath of God, saved from the corruption that is in this world, saved from the kingdom of darkness, saved out of empty and wasted lives. To be saved means that we also become children of God, and the natural process for a child of God is to be filled with the desire to grow spiritually. But spiritual maturity does not come by placing a Bible on our heads and hoping for instant knowledge and wisdom. How do we become spiritually mature? In 2 Peter 1:5-11, the apostle gives us two encouraging words to help us. First, he says (verse 5-9):

I. Be Diligent in Our Faith

Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness; and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, Christian love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or shortsighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins.

Peter is writing from Rome, where he is being held prisoner. This letter to the second generation Christians in

Asia Minor deals with the temptations they are facing from within their own communities to become unfaithful to their calling, to Follow false teachers, and to believe the mockers who hold that there will be no second coming of Christ.

Herein these verses Peter has in mind two kinds of Christians. First, those who are growing spiritually in the true knowledge of Christ (and whose lives, as a result, are useful and Fruitful): and secondly, Christians who are stumbling, fruitless and shortsighted due to temptations by society and the false teachers around them. To these Christians, then, Peter issues this imperative "Now for this very reason, applying all diligence Faithfulness is possible, he says, because as born again believers they had become partakers of Christ's divine nature and thus were channels of his divine power which was available to them to enable them to grow spiritually in the midst of a corrupt society

Peter lists seven virtues, not an exhaustive list, but helpful for their particular situation. Each of these virtues builds on the other, so that the Christians to whom he is writing could readily recall them. (The apostle Paul used a similar device when he listed the nine fruits of the Spirit in his letter to the Galatians.) An early church writer, the Shepherd of Hermas, wrote, "Faith, self-control, simplicity, innocence, reverence, understanding and love are the daughters of one another." The apostle encourages this spiritual community to build these seven virtues on the foundation of their faith in the resurrected Son of God. Having come to the place in their lives where they realized they needed a Savior to take away their sin, guilt and shame, they confessed with their mouths and believed in their hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead.

But faith does not stop there. This is merely the beginning of spiritual maturity. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul makes reference to both spiritual maturity and the equipping of the saints for the work of service:

. . . until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ. (Eph. 4:13-15)

At a conference in the Mid-West once I was asked to share my testimony of how I came to Christ. I had to admit that my conversion happened so long ago I probably would be tempted to use some of the much more impressive testimonies I had heard in the years since! Some Christians never seem to move away from the experience they had when they first came to Christ. Nothing seems to have happened to them in the interim, no growth, no fruit. That is a tragedy. There should be so much happening in Christians' lives that they want to do nothing but talk about their current experiences of God's working in them.

If you have been born again, you should be growing to be like Jesus. You have the divine power within you to make righteous choices. The power is already provided-all you have to do is make the choice to *allow* Jesus to express himself through you. He is living within you right now! Stop living your life as though he had never risen from the dead. As Peter said in his first letter, "Grow in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." I just saw an advertisement about a new book on how young Christians can grow to maturity. While I feel I need to read books like that, many of the books I read about how growth occurs in the Christian life are the open books of the lives of people in this congregation. When I want to see spiritual growth in operation I watch many of you herein this body. I follow you around and observe your behavior. Some of you I want to emulate. Some of you I'd rather not! I know also that there are others who are following me around, watching how I respond to circumstances. This is what the apostle Paul did.

He held himself up as a model of this in one of his letters, saying that others should imitate him as he imitated Christ.

Let us examine these seven virtues listed by Peter. "*In your faith supply moral excellence .*" Here the apostle encourages his readers to make a choice to become spiritually mature in different aspects of their lives. Ask God to show you your weaknesses, he is saying, and then decide to grow up in these areas. He is asking them

to "supply moral excellence in a morally decadent society. At the time Peter wrote this letter, the Emperor Nero, a murderer and a sexual pervert, was sitting on the throne. His government lacked integrity. The judicial system was undermined by bribery. Murder, thievery, kidnapping and dishonesty were a way of life in society. Cults and mystery religions abounded. Thousands of male and female prostitutes filled the temples. Despite all of this decadence, Peter encourages these Christians to choose to allow the Holy Spirit to make the indwelling Christ visible in the midst of this cesspool.

Christians should not seek to avoid the perpetrators of these things. They should try to reach out to them~taking care, of course, to not join in with them. Paul's word to the Philippians should be our guide here. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things; and the God of peace shall be with you.

In your walk of faith, check out your life now and again and see if you are walking in moral purity in the midst of this corrupt society. After all, this is a day when you can rent X-rated movies and take them home with you for your private viewing. Just go down to~the video rental store and pick up some of the garbage they call movies and you can become an "adult" in the privacy of your own home! But don't for one minute think that won't affect you. Make the choice to not pollute your home with this so-called entertainment. I know "Bambi" may not be as exciting as "Rambo," but it's up to you to make righteous choices. "That's life," people say, when they see scores of people slaughtered on their video screens as part of their Friday night entertainment. "They all get up again and play another part," we are told. But in real life they don't get up again. I know, because I'm often called to bury them. Check to see if you are walking in moral purity.

"In your faith supply moral excellence."

" . . . and in your moral excellence, knowledge." Peter is not talking about 'mere' facts, but the choice by the power of the Holy Spirit to gain personal knowledge of the reality of the Persons of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit and how the Trinity relates to all the circumstances of your life. Investigate spiritual truth. Add practical knowledge to what you already know so that you are able to walk in a godly fashion. Have a hunger for the Word of God. Seek the God who has revealed himself in his Son Jesus, not the sentimental god of someone's imagination~the "man upstairs," your "higher power," your buddy, etc. Seek knowledge of Jesus who suffered death so that you might have life.

Here are some wonderful words of advice from Paul concerning this:

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. (Colossians 1:9-12)

Peter continues, " . . . and in your knowledge, self-control." We acquire self-control when we choose to allow the Holy Spirit to enable us to take a grip on ourselves. We must allow him to control our passions and our emotions. While these are not wrong in themselves, when they get out of control we are affected emotionally and sometimes physically.

Aristotle, the Greek philosopher (384-322 B.C.) sensed the shallowness of the philosophy of his contemporary Socrates who said, "No one willingly rejects the best course once he sees it." Aristotle replied that men willingly and willfully sin and become captives of their own lust. Like our television philosopher Phil Donahue, though, he had no answer to the problem of human wickedness. All he could do was examine it and discuss it. Solutions failed him

I recently stumbled across an old copy of the Bible which I used in seminary back in the early '60's. When I looked inside the back cover I felt embarrassed. Written there were the words of two professors who had taken me aside at seminary and counseled me about self-control. "Ron," they said, "put under the Blood your moods. Seek control from God. You may never get rid of the temptation, but ask for control. Seek the cause of the mood. Look around whenever it comes to you Think it through and how it is affecting others viewing you." Back then my moods would last for days at a time. I used them to control everybody around me-my classmates, my wife and child. Finally these two men exhorted me that what I was doing was sinful, that I should place my moods under the Blood of Jesus Christ and ask him to control them. When I shared with a group of brothers recently that I was thankful to the Lord for dealing with my anger one of the men who had known me longer than any of the others present said, "The thing I'm excited about is that you don't have any more of those moods!" How grateful I was to the Lord for that! "And in your knowledge, self control."

" . . . and in your *self-control, perseverance.*" Peter is talking about patiently enduring trials, testings and hardships, realizing that God is in control and that everything is to his glory. Endurance is the God-given ability to trust him in the midst of suffering. This is not speaking of fatalism, hanging tough, having a stiff upper lip, etc. The apostle is remembering what he learned as he observed Jesus, "While being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, he uttered no threat, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously."

" . . . and in your *perseverance, godliness,*" Peter has already said, his divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness." Godliness is that God-given ability to reflect the character of Jesus in this corrupt society. We are to be holy, set apart to do the will of the Father, living rightly before God and men. In stark contrast, Peter will later describe the false teachers in these words, "These are men who delight in daylight self-indulgence; they are foul spots and blots, playing their tricks at your very dinner-tables, Their eyes cannot look at a woman without lust (2 Peter 2:14)

" . . . and in your *godliness, brotherly kindness.*" Peter is not referring to a duty here, rather he is speaking of the God-given ability to meet brothers and sisters from every nation, tribe and culture and feel the freedom to express spiritual kindness toward them, The apostle had earlier encouraged his readers, "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart for you have been born again," The Holy Spirit enables us to express brotherly kindness to one another and to fellowship together because we are a family, a spiritual body, In his book, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote,

It is easily Forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in communion with Christian brethren.

" . . . and in your *brotherly kindness, Christian love.*" Here Peter is referring to the God-given ability to express self-sacrificial love toward the world and toward our spiritual family. I John 3:16-18 gives a very clear definition of this kind of love:

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay dawn our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. (1 John 3:16-18)

Michael Green has written, "The Spirit of God who is love is freely given to us in order to reproduce in us the same quality. For men will never believe that god is love unless they see it in the lives of his professed followers."

Peter encourages these Christians to build on a foundation of faith the virtues he has just listed. They should

allow the Spirit of God to control them, to choose to be Christlike in these areas of life.

The apostle continues with a word of encouragement and a word of admonishment. Verse 8:

For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter is saying to these Christians, "If these qualities are yours, as you walk by faith you will be growing in your spirit. You have already become partakers of the divine nature, so all of these qualities and more reside in you right now. The resurrected Christ lives in you. Choose to allow him to express himself through you. The more you choose to allow him to be Lord of every area of your life the more these qualities will increase and overflow. As a result, your lives will become useful and fruitful." Spiritual growth comes from the true and Full knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and your desire to obey him. In contrast, the false knowledge taught by the false teachers produces spiritual death.

Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared before hand that we should walk in them." John 15:5 says, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing . . . By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples."

Are you open to taking in a transsexual to share your home? Finally, after many years of struggle, I have come to a place where I can say I would do so. Would you open your home to someone suffering from AIDS, clothe and feed him and take him to the doctor? When we have Christ living in our hearts he wants to manifest himself in these and similar ways. That is how communities are exposed to the salt and light of the gospel. That is how many men and women are called out of darkness into the kingdom of light as they see Jesus working through Christians. They will see eternal life and they will desire it for themselves. Do you want to be useful and fruitful? Choose it and you will be. It's not not enough to have all the rightanswers and hold all the moral judgments regarding the AIDS catastrophe. Homosexuals are confused, hurting-and dying by the hundreds. Christians above all have a ministry of hope, arid that is what we should be offering to the hurting and the dying in this corrupt world.

Now Peter turns to the admonishment:

For he who lacks these qualities is blind or shortsighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins.

The apostle is still addressing the problem of those who are being tempted to unfaithfulness. He has held up these seven virtues to be a mirror, as it were, for the believers in Asia Minor and said to them, "You think you know what you look like, but before you walk away with a false sense of security look into this mirror. If you cannot see these qualities, then you are blind to the spiritual realities and consequences of a wasted life on this earth. While you are able to understand earthly things, you are blind and shortsighted about spiritual realities. This has caused you to forget the love of God, the love of Jesus, the price he paid for your sins, the joy of his forgiveness, peace and righteousness. The result is that your life is unfruitful and wasted, without eternal value. You leave yourself open to the temptations and lies of the evil one and the false teachers,"

How can we be spiritually mature in a corrupt society? We must be diligent in our faith; and we must . . .

II. Be Certain of Our Calling

2 Peter 1:10-11:

Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.

Peter is saying, "In light of what I have just said, I want you to be certain of your salvation, Check to see if you are even in the family of God. Look at your life. If it's useful and fruitful, you have life. If not, you are blind and shortsighted and you maybe fooling yourselves."

"Make certain about His calling and choosing you," the apostle says. He had a clear understanding of the sovereignty of God. God foreknew all the events that would occur on earth. He foreknew all those who would participate in the fulfillment of his plans. Peter also knew that God elects some people to his own glory, and that he would work through these individuals whom he would separate unto himself. God predestined those whom he elected that they should be holy and blameless before him in love (Eph. 1:4). Then God "called" those whom he had foreknown, elected and predestined them unto himself. He called out to people who were "dead in their trespasses and sins," and then provided them with power to respond to his call. The apostle Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians,

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. And it was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess. 2:13-14)

" . . . for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble." Christians who practice these principles which Peter has set out thereby demonstrate a heart of faithfulness and indicate that they are anxious to grow to spiritual maturity. Although they would stumble and fall occasionally, they would not stumble disastrously, bringing grief to themselves and to others.

" . . . for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you." In the words, "In this way," Peter is referring to what he has already pointed out-- that is, applying all diligence to grow in Christ; and, making certain of God's calling and choosing you. The "entrance into the eternal kingdom" is open wide for the pilgrims who have established a personal relationship with the Lord and have served him faithfully. Throughout their long journey, they have been growing and learning, making mistakes now and again but coming back. All the resources of both the King and the kingdom are available right now because Christians are already living in eternity. God is presently ruling in his kingdom, which is our hearts.

How can we mature in a corrupt society? We don't grow by placing Bibles on our heads and hoping truth will seep in. Peter says we must be diligent in our faith. We should have a hunger For the Word of God. And then we must be certain of our calling. If God has chosen us, he will express himself through us as we go through life. Ask our Lord Jesus Christ to make these truths a reality of your life, starting right now! And He will!

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