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Intentional Faith Development

2 Peter 1:3-11

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

I want to thank everyone who took the time to say a prayer, send an email, or write a card or letter to me and my family this past week or so. I truly appreciate it. Some people have wondered why I am even here today, why am I preaching the day after my mother died. Passionate Worship isn't just for when we feel like it, it is for all the times we face in life, especially when life is hard. For me, this church, this community of faith is exactly where I wanted to be today so that I could feel your love, care, support, and prayers. There is no where else I would want to be on Sunday morning. When my sisters and I faced a difficult challenge or were having a hard time my mom would always tell us what her father told her, "*You need to put some steel where your backbone is supposed to be.*" Part of why I wanted to preach today is because I am the product of my mother and father's commitment to intentional faith development so it seems appropriate to me. I am going to need to take some time off and adjust my schedule so that I can be present and helpful to my father especially in the coming weeks. It is not the best way to begin a sermon about intentional faith development and the value of being in a group or Bible study in helping us in that process, but we will not have my midweek Bible Study in the coming weeks as planned. I hope you all understand. I will do it when I can in the future.

In the *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, the third practice after Radical Hospitality and Passionate Worship is Intentional Faith Development. We need to intend to develop our faith. If we have no intention to grow, develop, or mature our faith, we shouldn't be surprised if it doesn't! In 2 Peter there is a good description of the effort that is required on our part to support or intentionally develop our faith.

"His divine power **has given us everything needed for life and godliness**, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of strong desire, and may become participants in the divine nature. **For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.** For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. **For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.**”

The Twelve Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous is widely known and admired for its ability to save the lives of those who faithfully follow them by helping people stay sober one day at a time. **The self-examination and personal accountability that comes from accepting responsibility, relationships with sponsors, and faithful attendance and participation in group meetings is an extremely effective model for personal change.** While AA’s 12 Steps are based on Biblical principles, the connection is not directly drawn for their purposes.

As we seek to become more like Jesus, a variation of the 12 Steps is appropriate for us to consider. Listen to the following 12 Steps that someone modified for the spiritual journey of becoming more like Jesus. I will pause after each one. Be honest with yourself and try to identify where you are.

1. I admit that I am powerless over sin and that my life has become unmanageable.
2. I believe that God’s actions and those of Jesus and the Holy Spirit – can restore me to sanity.
3. I will turn my will and my entire life over to the care of God.
4. I will make a searching and fearless inventory of my life to discover all the ways I have engaged in self-worship (by being in control instead of living surrendered to the will of God).
5. I will admit to God, to myself, and to another human being the exact nature of my wrongs.
6. I am entirely ready to have God remove all the defects in my character and replace them – through God’s presence – with the thoughts, emotions, will, behavior and relationship patterns of Jesus.
7. I humbly ask God to help me to become willing to deny myself - and the desire to live life on my terms - and to remove my shortcomings.
8. I will make a list of all the people I have harmed and become willing to make amends.
9. I will, if possible, make direct amends to all I have injured.

10. I will continue to take personal inventory, and when I wrong someone, I will promptly admit it.
11. I will through prayer, meditation, and the practice of other Christian disciplines, attempt to improve my conscious contact with God.
12. Having experienced some measure of authentic transformation as a result of surrendering all aspects of myself to the power and presence of Jesus, I will carry this message to others and continue to practice these principles in all my life.

Whether one looks at AA or being a Christian, there is a intentional pattern that if followed, leads to change. Today's scripture from 2 Peter asserts that the basis for Christian growth and a godly life is our personal knowledge of and faith in Jesus. Experiencing spiritual growth, however, requires human effort in cooperation with the Spirit of God.

2 Peter 1:5, *"You must make every effort to support your faith..."*

We grow in our spiritual life and in fulfilling our life's mission by well-directed effort.

Grace is not opposed to effort, but to earning!

Intentionally developing and growing our faith is what this passage from 2 Peter is about. Verse 3 says God *"has given us everything needed for life and godliness."* Verse 4 says God *"has given us his precious and very great promises."* The fact that we can have a relationship with God is based on God's goodness. Faith is a gift. In the New Testament, faith originates in the impact of God's word upon our soul and then exercises a transforming influence upon all aspects of life. One of the clear ways our faith is displayed is through the development and growth of our character as we grow in Christian virtue.

Oswald Chambers wrote, ***"We have to do something. We are in danger of forgetting that we cannot do what God does, and that God will not do what we can do. We cannot save or sanctify ourselves – God does that. But God will not give us good habits or character, and he will not force us to walk correctly before him. We have to do all that ourselves. Beware of the tendency to ask the way when you know it perfectly well. Take the initiative. Be determined to act immediately in faith on what God says to you when he speaks. We have to get into the habit of carefully listening to God***

about everything, forming the habit of finding out what he says and heeding it. We have to take the initiative where we ARE, not where we have not yet been.”¹

It’s like the old saying by Charles Reade about developing character,
“Sow a **thought**, reap an **act**; sow an **act**, reap a **habit**; sow a **habit**, reap a **character**.”

“No one is born either naturally or supernaturally with character, it must be developed. Nor are we born with habits – we have to form godly habits on the basis of the new life God has placed within us. If the majesty, grace, and power of God are not being exhibited in us, God holds us responsible.”²

God wants us to grow spiritually. God has placed this potential in our spirit and it waits for us to respond to God’s call and to help create the conditions in which God’s word can take root and bear fruit. I was fascinated by the story of a handful of wheat, 5,000 years old, that was found in the tomb of one of the kings of Egypt. Someone planted some of the grains, and to the amazement of all, the grains came to life.

The words of the scriptures are like seeds, full of life and energy. And they can remain in seed form for centuries until they are sown in a receptive, ripe, heart. Many of us used to think the words of scripture were dead and dry. But it was our heart that was stony and dead, so how could anything grow there?

² Peter warns us that it is possible to know the Lord Jesus and yet be unfruitful and ineffective as a follower of Christ. God has given us everything needed for life and godliness, and then it is up to us to make every effort to grow in Christ-likeness.

As we are trying to live out these virtues which God’s grace and the Holy Spirit’s power make possible, this scripture concludes by urging us, **“Be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never stumble. For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.”** This is Peter’s way of saying, be sure to confirm your reservation in the eternal kingdom. My mom and dad were kind enough to send Jill and I on our honeymoon 20 year ago. When we were returning, our last night on the way home was at a hotel at San Francisco’s airport. Our plane tickets, which had been booked months in advance, said our flight was at 11:00 a.m. so we figured we had plenty of time to sleep in and get ready. We were tired so we slept later than usual the next morning. When we put the television on and were changing stations we saw a channel with flight information on it. We thought that was interesting, we’d never seen

¹ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, May 10.

² Chambers, May 16, June 15.

anything like that before so we decided to check on our flight. For some strange reason, it wasn't there. I got dressed, hopped a shuttle to the terminal and found out our flight left two hours earlier without us. We hadn't done what we were supposed to do – we failed to pick up the phone to confirm our place for the trip home.

2 Peter is urging us to confirm a far more important flight home than the one Jill and I missed. In our case, we were able to catch a later plane. We are called to accept and confirm Jesus' invitation to repent, to be saved, to serve God, and to enter into the kingdom and to share in its blessings. Jesus has given us everything needed for a godly life, but Peter's words emphasize the importance of our making every effort to support our faith with goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love. As followers of Jesus we confirm our calling through the life we lead through the knowledge and power of Christ and the help of other people as we grow in what God wants us to do.

“For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.” Some people might wonder why I am preaching the day after my mother died. Well part of the reason is because I can't talk about intentional faith development without thinking of my parents. I am who I am largely because my parents intentionally tried to develop my faith by bringing me to Sunday School, worship, and Vacation Bible School from the time I was a little boy. Obviously it is not easy when someone we love very much is dying, however, I took comfort as I sat by my mother's side, holding her hand, stroking her hair, talking to her and praying for her that I believe with all my heart that through her faith which she intentionally developed and practiced for decades that ***entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ would be richly provided for her.***

My mom truly exemplified about faith what Mother Teresa wrote in her book, *Heart of Joy*, “Let us be like **a genuine and fruitful branch** of the vine, which is Christ, accepting him in our lives the way he gives himself to us:

as TRUTH which must be SPOKEN; as LIFE which must be LIVED;

as LIGHT, which must SHINE OUT; as LOVE which must be LOVED;

as a WAY, which must be TRODDEN;

as JOY; which must be COMMUNICATED;

as PEACE, which must be RADIATED;

as SACRIFICE, which must be OFFERED

*in our families, to our closest neighbors, and to those who live far away.*³

Prayer: Help us, Lord Jesus, to live in the kingdom of God as you did.

Blessing: 2 Peter 3:18, “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and on the day of eternity.”

³ Mother Teresa, *Heart of Joy*, p. 114.