

## DON'T SETTLE

When I was in elementary school, every year we'd have a fundraiser of some sort. I remember one year being a little bit different though. That year all the students were brought down to the cafeteria/gym/auditorium for a school assembly where we were encouraged to sell, sell, sell. Then the curtains on the stage were drawn back, and a mountain of prizes were on display, just waiting for the top sellers to claim them.

I vividly remember the top prize that year because it was something nearly every kid my age was pining for—a 10-speed bike. It was an aerodynamic wonder, wheels and spokes gleaming in the gymnasium light, its cool, curved handles calling out to be gripped and steered around sharp corners and down long, smooth roads.

Now, the happy ending for this story would be how I worked so hard that I was able to be the top seller, and that I triumphantly—yet humbly—claimed that new, shiny bicycle for myself. But, that's not how the story ends because I didn't win the bike.

In fact, I didn't win any of the prizes that were on display because, though I wanted what was up there, I thought to myself that getting them was simply going to be too much work. I settled for the bare minimum, which was a duffel bag. You can see and hear just how much joy the duffel bag has brought to my life.

While I was reading and re-reading this passage over the course of this last week, I wondered to myself if, sometimes, we are just like the elementary school me, people who settle for the bare minimum that the Christian life has to offer. We can have the bicycle, but instead we take the duffel bag. As we have gone through each characteristic, each attribute, each rung on the ladder that Pastor Leo has so skillfully unpacked for us, we might have been tempted to settle because though the list is incredibly attractive—I have yet to run into any believers who say they do not want to be good or godly or loving—there is no denying that adding them and, as v.8 calls us to do, increasing in them takes work. No, we can't do the work on our own—these things all come to us from God through our relationship with Jesus—but they do require an ongoing, lifelong, diligent commitment from us to work with God, to cooperate with Him in this process. And maybe—just maybe—we may think to ourselves that it's okay to simply settle. Before we do that, let's hear what God has to say in vv.8-9.

Note that there is both an encouragement and a warning here. Now, I am typically a bad-news-first kind of guy, but let's follow the flow of the text. We start with an encouragement: if we will diligently work at and continue to grow in these seven virtues, we will be kept from being “ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Well, what does that mean? Let's break this down and we'll see just how important and amazing this is.

The first important word there is ineffective, which is literally “not useful.” So the promise here is that if we will stay on task with these virtues, we will be kept

useful, that we will stay useful. God will be able to use us. I stopped for a moment and tried to think of something that stays useful. The first thing that popped into my head was money, but even money isn't useful at all times and in all situations. I thought of my favorite tool, my electric drill, but realized that there are many days that drill just sits lonely, hoping for a hole to make or a screw to drive, or can't be used because it needs its batteries recharged. Then I thought, “Well, it's impossible for us to stay useful to God because we get tired and sick sometimes.” And then I remembered visiting Tanya O'Dell, a Bethel regular, in the hospital this past week. She was in pain, she hadn't eaten in close to a day, she was tired, she was away from her kids, she was burdened by the costs of her hospital stay, and she was being given all kinds of antibiotics... and she was an incredible blessing to me. In the midst of everything, she could not

help but tell me about how good God is, and how good He had been to her, especially through the people of Bethel. She was useful to God in spite of everything else that was going on in her life, and her words and outlook encouraged and convicted me. I want to be like that. I want to be useful, and I want to stay useful. I want people see God in me and through me, and that can happen if I am willing to commit myself to adding and growing in these virtues.

Additionally, v. 8 tells us that we will be kept from being “unproductive.” The Greek word behind this, literally translated, means “unfruitful.” When we commit ourselves to these virtues, we will remain fruitful. Being fruitful, for us, means that there is an outward evidence of the relationship with Jesus we have formed on the inside. Galatians 5:22-23 discusses this idea when it talks about the fruit of the Spirit: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.” Hmmm... Sounds sort of familiar, doesn’t it? In fact, when we lay this list against the one from vv. 5-7 in this passage, there are several that match. It makes sense that if we commit ourselves to adding and growing in these virtues, that they will become hallmarks of who we are. I had a dear friend who personified these virtue lists—I say that because he went to be with the Lord about two years ago. Pastor Chuck was my mentor during my studies at Denver Seminary, and he was the type of person people loved to be around. He always had a smile and a kind word for people, and he exuded a warmth and godliness that was almost tangible. I remember taking my parents to meet Pastor Chuck when they visited one summer, and after the visit they were both visibly moved and nearly speechless. Finally, my Mom said, “What an incredible man!” I certainly agreed with that statement, but what made Pastor Chuck so incredible was the outward evidence of the inward relationship he had with an incredible God. He was fruitful. I want to be fruitful like that, and to stay fruitful. I want my relationship with Jesus to be evident to everyone around in the way I act and the person I am, and this passage tells me that can happen if I am willing to commit myself to adding and growing in these virtues.

Finally v. 8 tells us that we will be kept from being ineffective and unproductive “in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” We know this is important because Peter repeats this phrase—or something very similar to it—in v. 2 and v. 3. What we need to understand first is that knowledge here doesn’t mean that we know something about Jesus, but that we know Jesus. It refers to relationship. To understand the full significance of this knowledge, we need to return to v. 3 where it says, “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.” Friends, everything we need for life and godliness comes through our knowledge of—our relationship with—Jesus. Friends, here’s the weight of v.8: When we commit to adding and growing in this virtue list that we’ve been covering the last seven weeks, we stay useful and fruitful in this relationship we have with Jesus, who gives us everything we need for life. And do you remember what Jesus said about life? In John 10:10, Jesus says, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Some other translations use the word “abundantly.” Eugene Peterson puts it this way in *The Message*: “I came so that they could have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.” When we commit ourselves to adding and growing in these virtues, we make our relationship with Jesus vital, and through that relationship we have real life, eternal life, a better life than we ever could have dreamed of! I want that life! I don’t want what passes for “real life” on the television and in the movies. That’s not real life anyway; it’s just chasing one empty thing after another, because nothing but Living Water quenches us, nothing but Jesus satisfies or gives us a sense of purpose. I don’t want to settle for anything less.

In the event we’re still tempted to settle for something less than that full life Jesus promises us, listen again to the warning in v. 9: “But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.” First, Peter explains to us that when we choose to settle, when we decide that we’d rather not pursue that abundant life and we forego growing in these virtues, we become figuratively blind and nearsighted. The nuance of the original language here gives us the idea that the person’s vision isn’t handicapped because of

a defect or physical condition, but because the person closed their eyes. That is essentially what we do if we choose not to grow in these virtues, isn't it? We must close our eyes to them, otherwise we are constantly reminded of their necessity. But when we do so, we also close our eyes to that full, real life that Jesus promises. I don't know what it's like to be physically blind, so I called Bethel's own Bea Furman to ask her what it was like. Now, those of you who know Bea know that God has gifted her in some incredible ways to serve and be active, and she told me that she does not really dwell on the fact that she cannot see. But there are moments, she said, when the fact that she does not have sight does have an impact on her. She said, "Sometimes you don't really get it all," and she spoke of not receiving the full impact of a movie or the sunset. If we choose not to grow in these virtues—if we close our eyes to them—we won't get it all. We will neither see nor experience real life. We will have settled for something much, much less.

Moreover, v. 9 tells us that choosing not to grow in these virtues causes us to forget what Jesus has done for us. We forget that we have been cleansed of our past sins and, by extension, we forget that Jesus can take care of the ones we will commit today and tomorrow as well. I don't know if you've ever seen or read *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, but I am reminded of the ghost of Jacob Marley every time I think of past sins. As the picture above shows, the ghost of Jacob Marley was covered in heavy chains, with each link and lock representing sin from his life. He was doomed to wander the earth in death wearing the chains that he had created in life. For those who receive Christ, the chains of sin are forever broken. Yet, should we forget what Christ has done for us, it is as if we put those chains back on and weighed ourselves down with our misdeeds and failures. There is no experiencing the full life here because we are not free to do it.

The question that remains is which one will you and I choose? Will you choose the sleek 10-speed, or will you settle for the duffel bag? Will you choose the abundant life, or will you choose something much, much less? You can have the 10-speed, you can have the abundant life—the life better than you ever dreamed. It will take some effort on your part, a commitment to growing in this list of seven virtues and cooperating with God as He works in you, but what you get is more than you can imagine and much more than anything else this world has to offer. Don't settle for anything less.