

OUTCOMES: THREE ASSURANCES

US Keds were the hottest thing in tennis shoes when I was in the 1st grade. At least, that's what the ads told me. They had white rubber soles with high-topped, black canvas uppers. A red stripe outlined the rubber where it met the canvas. On each ankle was a white circle with the trademark US Keds logo. Keds advertised themselves as "The Shoe of Champions!" And they added a tag line for moms: "They wash."

At six years of age I was already a savvy consumer, because when my folks bought me a brand new pair of Keds, I knew my charmed life as the neighborhood champion had begun. I finally had the means to become the fastest kid in the complex of post-WWII, Quonset hut apartments where we lived.

I still remember the fresh rubber smell when I pulled them out of the box. It was intoxicating. I laced up my new Keds and ran outside, certain that I could zoom and boom!

A quick dash down the sidewalk diminished my hopes. They were nice shoes, but they did nothing for my speed. As I kept trying for that magic burst of acceleration Keds were supposed to give me, it gradually dawned on me that Keds weren't living up to their billing. The advertisers had been less than truthful. They were just shoes and I was still me.

I think that might have been when my heart first tasted cynicism.

Some of the best and brightest minds in corporate America earn phenomenal incomes trying to convince us that if we buy the right toothpaste, hair color or beverage, it will resolve our social life, make us irresistible, and confer peer envy. Driving the right car can ignite your life! A recent Cadillac ad features Kate Walsh from *Gray's Anatomy* who asks, "The question is when you turn your car on, does it return the favor?"

Our problem is that we really want to believe these messages. We want quick fixes for our complex, messy lives. We are susceptible to offers of magic bullets that sweep us into life-change that is both instant and permanent. And we are continually disappointed. Our cynicism deepens.

We bring our cynicism to church. I do. I'm not cynical about God and his grace, or the Bible and the truthfulness of its message. My skepticism flares up when I hear people offer simple formulas and quick fixes for spiritual success. Christian living packaged into three or four easy steps arouses my suspicions. Life on this broken planet can be chaotic and heartbreaking. I'm allergic to tidy sermons that ignore that reality, in spite of the fact that I have probably preached my fair share of them.

So when I come to a text like the one we have been exploring in 2 Peter, I have some native resistance to overcome. Peter sounds too pat. If I was listening to him on TV, I'd probably turn him off. But what Peter wrote is inspired speech. He's carried along by the Holy Spirit as he puts pen to paper. These are words from God. So the simplicity of the message cannot be discounted. Peter is giving us the straight goods on how to transform our lives, reform our hearts, and live successfully as a Christ-follower.

God's power has given us everything we need for godly living through our knowledge of Jesus. Through his own glory and goodness he has given us priceless promises which enable us to participate in God's own nature – we can be like God.

Because of what God's power and promises supply to us, Peter urges us to get busy – to lavishly supply our faith with seven virtues:

- to faith, add goodness – moral excellence;
- to goodness, add knowledge;

- to knowledge, self-control – becoming strong in the inner person of the heart;
- to self control, add perseverance – that long endurance of faith;
- to perseverance, add godliness – living like God matters;
- to godliness, add brotherly love – *philadelphia*;
- to brotherly-love, add love – *agape*, unprovoked love.

The outcomes of these seven virtues are more than worth the effort. If we invest ourselves in the pursuit of these virtues, if they are growing in us, they will make us spiritually productive and fruitful in our knowledge of Jesus – our lives will count for something significant in his Kingdom. We will live successfully in God’s sight.

If we settle for bare minimums, choosing to be merely religious, if these virtues are nothing more than faint aspirations, if they don’t show up in our values and choices – we’re blind, nearsighted, having forgotten that Jesus washed us clean from our old sinful way of life.

And that’s not all, look at 1 Peter 1:10-11: “Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

“Therefore” should probably be expanded to “Therefore rather.” Peter is picking up on his warning in v. 9 about being blind, nearsighted – think “shortsighted.” Don’t settle – rather, brothers and sisters, be diligent – get a wiggle on – to make your calling and election sure.”

If you have been a Christian for any time at all, as soon as you hear that word “election,” your mind immediately sidetracks into one of history’s great theological conversations. Could we not go there? Peter uses the terms “calling and election,” to describe our salvation. He’s doing it to remind us that salvation is God’s initiative. My response to the grace of God in Jesus – the good news of the gospel – was a response to God’s call, God’s invitation. God sought me – I wasn’t seeking God.

So, Peter says, do on your part what corresponds to what God has already initiated and accomplished in you. You responded to his call. He saved you. Now, you live into the assurance of your salvation. Make it sure.

How?

By aggressively building these seven virtues into your life.

The way Peter crafted his language gives us hints about his intent that are hard to translate into smooth English. If we could paraphrase, it might sound something like this: “...be all the more eager to make certain for yourselves regarding your calling and election – your salvation.” In other words, as we respond to the exhortations in these verses, as we experience the impact of God’s power and promises and make progress in becoming like Jesus, as we live out of the Holy Spirit’s impulse to grow into these seven virtues, we will have a deepening assurance of our salvation.

Conversely, if we settle for merest Christianity; if we are too busy or too otherwise preoccupied to give ourselves to developing spiritually, we may have questions about the reality of our faith. We may wonder if we really belong to God.

The best assurance that we belong to Christ comes from the authenticity and vitality of our spiritual life. If you can be comfortable with a careless spirituality and a general lack of real life-change, if you can keep God on the margins of your life and pursue other things that matter more, you will never enjoy the full assurance of faith.

Peter calls us to diligent effort so that we can be personally assured of our salvation. We experience the reality of faith as God’s power and promises energize our own diligent efforts at becoming like Jesus – adding these seven virtues. We get it. And our confidence goes deep.

Along with that, “If you do these things – if you richly supply your faith with these seven virtues – you will never fall.”

In a happy accident born of tri-focals, when we introduced this series I read this verse to say, "...you will never *fail*." That's really not far off the mark. To the extent that we are being diligent to add these virtues to our lives, we won't fail to be transformed, productive and fruitful. We won't get tripped up. We won't stumble.

The promise is curious because, as James reminds us, "We all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2). Although he goes on to add that if we can tame our tongues, we are truly grown up spiritually and "...able to keep our whole body in check."

So is it possible to live without stumbling spiritually?

Perfectly? No – not until we stand before Jesus, complete in him.

But substantially? Absolutely.

The Apostle Paul said something similar: "...live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Gal. 5:16). Both Peter and Paul used a construction grammarians call an emphatic negation. It's a negative with italics and an exclamation point! Live by the Spirit and you absolutely will not carry out what your sinful nature wants to do. Peter says, Be diligent about adding these seven virtues and you absolutely will not stumble.

Peter is not talking about falling away from grace – losing our salvation. He's talking about living into our salvation. We cannot give ourselves to what God wants and what the flesh wants at the same time. We cannot press hard against God and embrace evil at the same time. We have to turn our face away from God in order to sin.

Part of our problem is that our experience deceives us. In his previous letter, Peter exhorts us to "...abstain from sinful desires, which *war against your soul*" (1 Peter 2:11). The sinful desires that well up from our own sinful natures wage war against our truest, redeemed selves. When we engage that battle, it can feel like we are defeated already. The very fact that we experience powerful temptation feels like a failure. Satan confuses us by insinuating that real Christians shouldn't feel that way.

Guys, that's why sexual lust can be so confusing. The virtue of self-control gives us inner strength to conduct the battle. It enables us not to yield. Not giving in to our impulses is a win! Make no mistake, we are at war and this war in particular is hell. The struggle is all too often inflamed from the pit.

But temptation is not sin. Fondling temptation leads to sin. Mentally playing with desire is sin. If we lean hard into God and pursue these virtues, we won't be immune to the battle, but we won't stumble. We can keep our spiritual footing.

G. K. Chesterton wrote that: "It is always simple to fall; there is an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands."

If you do these things, you will *never* fall!"

...and – v. 11.

Look back at v. 5 again. When Peter said, "...add to your faith..." he used the word *epichorēgeo*. *Epichorēgeo*, if you remember, described what a patron of the arts did for the theater. He provided the front money for the *chorus* – sets and costumes. Rich patrons lavished money on dramatic productions as a way of showing off their wealth. *Epichorēgeo* came to describe extravagant provision. Peter seeks to persuade us to bring that intensity and abundance of resources to our spiritual development – becoming like Jesus.

He uses *epichorēgeo* again in v. 11. If we give ourselves lavishly to building these virtues into our lives, God will *epichorēgeo* – lavishly provide – a rich welcome into Christ's kingdom.

Jeannette and I had a date night last weekend in Grand Rapids. We got tickets to a concert in the De Vos Hall, and a room at the four star Amway Grand Hotel. It's just something you have to do every 35 years or so.

The Amway Grand has a number of wide staircases that sweep down into ornate lobbies.

They make for perfect grand entrances for bridal parties, receptions and other formal events.

Listen to how the NLT renders v. 11: “Then God will give you a grand entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

In the New Jerusalem Jesus is building for his capital city, he’s using translucent gold for pavement, pearls for gates, and precious gems for foundations stones. I wonder what kind of grand staircase he has in mind to welcome and honor those who give themselves to these seven virtues. Imagine the overflow of God’s generous heart on those who have diligently pursued them. Imagine hearing the applause of heaven simply because you trusted God’s power, believed God’s promises and partnered with God in becoming like Jesus.

In these nine brief verses Peter has condensed the Christian life with clarity and simplicity. God has provided incredible resources that enable us to fulfill his game plan for a productive and fruitful life. If we do these things, we will live lives that authenticate the certainty and reality of our faith. We will never stumble. And God will lavish on us a rich welcome into the eternal Kingdom of our LORD and Savior Jesus Christ.

It’s simple. It’s not easy, but it is simple. And the outcomes are absolutely worth the effort.

May God etch these verses upon the walls of our hearts. May he ignite our souls with a passion for building these virtues into our lives. And may we live with hope intact that it’s worth it – it will be worth it all when we see Jesus.