

“The Rhythm of Rest and Work”

2 Peter 1:1-11

January 31, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

We’re continuing today in our series of sermons on the gospel-centered life. Our contention is that the Bible teaches that we grow into Christlikeness as we learn to believe the gospel at a daily, practical level in our lives. Or to say it in the way that Peter says it both at the beginning and end of his second epistle, we need to grow in our knowledge of God’s grace (1:2; 3:18). One of the very significant questions in all this concerns the role of human effort in our growth. That’s the issue Peter addresses in the first half of this chapter. His basic answer is that we as Christ’s followers are to practice a rhythm of rest and work. We must rest in the grace of Jesus before anything else, and then we must work hard at our personal growth.

We are all familiar with the need for this rhythm of rest and work in the realm of physical health. Too much of one and too little of the other will lead to ill-health. A player on our daughter’s soccer team suffered this past year from over-training. She failed to give her muscles sufficient rest, with the result that she developed a chronic condition in which she gets quickly fatigued at modest levels of exertion. The cure prescribed by the doctors is several months of rest. The opposite imbalance is far more common, isn’t it? Childhood obesity, resulting from too much rest (as well as too many calories) and too little physical exercise, has become a national plague. Just as physical health flourishes with the right relationship and balance between rest and work, so we flourish spiritually when both rest and work are present in the appropriate way in our lives. Let’s look at what Peter says about that.

I. Resting in God’s Grace – v. 1-4

Peter begins his letter with very clear and very strong statements about the grace of God. We see this from the very beginning. Note, for example, the way he addresses his letter – **“To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.”** Peter says of his readers that they have an equal standing with him and the other apostles. Being one of the most powerful and influential leaders in the early church did not elevate him to a special standing, because everything he had, and everything his readers had, was by the grace of God. The old saying that the ground at the foot of the cross is level comes to mind here. Their standing was not by their own righteousness, but by the righteousness of Jesus, who is called here “our God and Savior.” And then note

how he prays for grace and peace to be multiplied to his readers. He doesn't want to settle for just a little of God's grace upon them, but multiplied grace.

One of Peter's central convictions comes through in the way he speaks of the knowledge of God in these verses. Notice verse 2, for example. Grace and peace is multiplied "in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord." It is through knowing God that his grace and peace become large in our lives. The one truth that has special power to transform us is the truth of God's smile upon us through Jesus. I notice that Peter ends his letter in this same way. **"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"** (3:18).

Peter then highlights one of the chief expressions of God's grace. It is the fact that God initiates a relationship with us through his promises. **"He has granted to us his precious and very great promises."** Until you know this about God, you don't know the true God. God doesn't initiate a relationship with us through obligation, but through promise. He doesn't say to us, "Here are my requirements, which I am making a condition of any continued relationship with me." Instead, he says to us, "I am going to enter into a relationship with you. I will be your God and will do everything necessary to establish and sustain this relationship. Of course, since I am a holy God and you are a sinful people, I can't have a relationship with you as things are currently. But I myself will take care of the problem posed by your sin. I give to you the sin-bearer, Jesus, by whom your record will be cleansed completely."

God enters into a relationship with us through promise. Just over 29 years ago, a young 24-year old woman made a promise to me that no one had ever made prior to that, and no one since then. Wendy Strassner promised to be my loving and faithful wife, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both could draw breath. I made the same promise to her, and it has been this promise that really began our relationship as we know it today. Of course, we knew one another prior to that, but there is a depth of relationship that is only made possible in the context of such an unconditional promise. I now try to please my wife not in order to win her love, but because I already have her love. I've had it for over 29 years. Our relationship has deepened during that time, but it was our mutual promise on our wedding day that has most defined our relationship. You don't have a knowledge of God until you hear him promise the same to you. To know God is like the old language of knowing, as in **"Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain"** (Gen. 4:1). It means to be secure in God's love, to rest in it and have a confidence in it.

These promises through which God begins a relationship with us are called "precious" and "very great." Let's think about these two adjectives for just a moment. God's promises are precious. Something is precious when it possesses three qualities: it must be rare, beneficial and enduring. Gold sells for more

than \$1000 per ounce because it possesses all three of those qualities. God's promises are rare not in the sense of being few in number, because God has made many promises to us. They are rare in the sense that promises from most other sources fail to be kept, while no promise from God has ever failed. Money promises joy and security, but it delivers neither. Accomplishment promises a sense of meaning, but often it leads to the opposite, a sense of emptiness. Physical beauty promises love from others, but often leads to the one who possesses the beauty being used by others instead of loved by them. God's promises are precious because they never fail. Heaven and earth would sooner pass away than a single promise from God fail to be realized.

God's promises are not only precious, but very great. They are great because they speak of great things. If Wendy asks me to take out the trash, and I say yes, I have made a promise to her. Every promise is important, but not every promise is great. A promise to take out the trash is not a great promise because it doesn't speak of great things. God's promises speak of great things. Notice that he says that it is through his promises that we **"become partakers of the divine nature"** (v. 4). He doesn't mean that we become as God himself, but that the original design for humanity is realized as we bear God's image. God's promises deal with our future beyond the grave, promising us an experience of God's **"own glory and excellence"** (v. 3). And it is through God's promises that we are delivered from great danger, **"having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire"** (v. 4). I like Paul's summary of God's promises to us. **"If God is for us, who can be against us?... For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Rom. 8:31, 37-39).

This emphasis on the grace of God is all the more significant because of two issues with the context of this letter. Note first of all that Peter is nearing the end of his life. He says in verse 14, **"I know that the putting off of my body will be soon."** The certainty of a death that is drawing near has a way of helping us separate the important from the unimportant. As death approached, Peter knew that God's grace was of the greatest importance. The second issue of the letter's context is the fact that Peter is writing to combat an error centered on the abuse of the grace of God. It is likely that Peter is combating the same error as Jude, where some false teachers were perverting the grace of God into sensuality (Jude 4). Peter's opponents were distorting Paul's teaching in a manner that was probably the same (3:16). That is, they were saying that since we are saved by grace, it doesn't matter what we do. It is striking that Peter seeks to counter this error not by backing off from God's grace, but by affirming it as strongly as he could. Those guilty of this error of abusing God's grace by using it as an excuse for their own sin didn't need less of God's grace, but more. As Paul taught, it is the grace of God that trains **"us to renounce**

ungodliness and worldly passions” (Titus 2:12). That brings us to our next point.

II. Working Hard at Personal Growth – v. 5-11

The first words of verse 5 are significant. **“For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge.”** Biblical logic is different than the logic of our sin nature. When we hear about the grace of God, we easily think, “This is great. I can sin freely and God will just forgive me.” Peter applies God’s grace in the opposite direction, saying that God’s grace should lead us into making every effort to grow. It is essential to keep this straight. Some people want to focus on personal growth apart from the grace of God. That leads to legalism and moralism and ultimately to a works-righteousness. Others want the grace of God that leads to an easy religion that makes no demands for human effort. The heart of New Testament ethics is to say that since God has brought us into relationship with him purely by his grace, then let us love him and obey him. It is not unlike marriage. What would you think about a husband who says to his wife, “Since you promised to love me for better or worse, I’m just going to do what I want to do no matter how bad that makes your life. You promised to be faithful to me no matter how bad I am, so I’m going to be as bad as I want.” Such behavior is so self-centered that it’s almost too hard to imagine.

Peter argues more like this. “Since God has entered into a relationship with us through his great promises, let us apply all our effort in following him.” To follow Christ requires hard work. We are to make every effort to supplement faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and then self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection and love. I don’t think he means to teach that growth takes place in precisely this sequence, that we work on faith, and then when that is mastered, we move on to virtue and knowledge and the others. I think he is simply saying that Christians keep advancing in these areas.

In one of his sermons, John Piper describes a true story he read to his boys called *Glenda’s Long Swim*. Glenda was married to Robert, and one day they were four miles off the coast of Florida fishing from their yacht. Glenda decided to cool off by going for a swim in the water, but soon found that the current was carrying her far from the boat. She shouted for her husband to come help her, and without thinking, he dove straight in to come to her aid. Now, of course, they were both in big trouble as the current took them further from their boat. Since Robert was a champion swimmer, they realized that their only hope would be for him to swim against the current until it weakened and then try to reach the boat and call for help in searching for his wife. For six hours, the current remained against him, and he had to fight for everything he was worth just to keep the boat in sight. But finally the tide turned and he was able

to get back to the boat, though he was utterly exhausted in the effort. A day later the search party found his wife, twenty miles from land but still alive.

Robert and Glenda's story is a good illustration of the Christian life. We would all like to come to the place in our Christian lives where we can just float and have the current of God's grace take us where we should go. All that would be required of us would be to sit back and enjoy the ride. But the truth is that our situation is more like a river current taking us to a dangerous waterfall. Our only hope is to swim as hard as we can against the current.

What does it mean to make every effort to see that these virtues are made a part of our lives? It helps me to think of areas in my life where I make an effort at something. A few years ago, I discovered that the gas company had erroneously removed several thousand dollars from my checking account. I made every effort to see that the money was returned. I made several phone calls, took names of people I spoke to, and verified that the money was returned to my account when they said it would be. I was the opposite of passive. Peter is telling us to apply that same level of intentionality to our spiritual growth, to such things as one's prayer life and meditation on God's word.

Peter then lists several results of engaging in this kind of intentional hard work to grow in Christian virtues. The basic result is that by doing so we grow in our knowledge of God's grace. **"For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ"** (v. 8). This rhythm of rest and work works in the spiritual realm exactly as it does in the physical. The athlete must make sure he or she is getting enough of both of these in order to make progress. Rest is necessary for work, and work is necessary for growth and even for rest itself. We rest in God's grace, which motivates us to work. Our work then gives us a better grasp on God's grace. Verse 9 makes the point even more explicitly, saying that the one who lacks these qualities that come only as we make every effort is blind, **"having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins."** This person is nearsighted, seeing only what is right in front of him.

CONCLUSION:

In the last two verses of our passage, Peter makes it very clear that this rhythm of rest and work is an essential part of following Christ. By it we make our election sure and we are welcomed into heaven. So let's apply this now in the Lord's Supper. Let's rest in the grace of Jesus, enjoying the fullness we have in him. And now, is there some step God would have you take in making every effort to grow in these virtues?