

Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse – May 10th 2009
2 Peter 1:5-11

The Bible is a strange book, full of seemingly irreconcilable statements. If you want to live, then you have to die; if you want to become great, you have to become small; if you want to be a leader, you have to become a servant. In the Kingdom, when you are cursed then you are blessed, and the first shall be last. It takes a while to get used to this world of paradox.

So here we have in verse 3 Peter saying that God's divine power has given us everything we need, but now he says that we should make every effort to add to your faith. This seems illogical.

But it's like saying that you have all the money you need for the life you want, only invest it wisely, and don't squander it. In the same way the spiritual life requires discipline. You have all you need for life and godliness, but it requires wise stewarding. It calls for diligence and discipline. Having all you need is not the same as making of it all you can.

What Peter is saying is this: whilst it is all grace, and that the power is from God, the other side of this is that we make every effort to work it out. Ian made comparison with his loft conversion when the builders back in February brought all the equipment and materials they needed and dumped it in his front garden. They had everything they needed, but it would be utterly useless unless the builders set to work. And it's not that we are saved by works, no, we are saved by faith. Christianity is something that is done to you. But rather than this gift of grace fostering complacency, it is the exact opposite – God's divine nature has given everything we need for life and godliness, and our task is therefore to furnish this faith we have been given with virtues. We cooperate with God, pressing on in the work of transformation. Not perfectionism, but a desire to move on, not accepting 'because I have always been like that'. We make every effort, striving with the power that is at work in us.

Peter is saying all this because the doctrine of free love was rife by this time. Since it is clear that Jesus is not returning and that there is no such thing as judgement, then we can do as we please. Some were distorting Paul's letters in which he taught the grace and mercy of God, but that does not give us licence to do just anything. But that same grace teaches us to say no, to restrain, to discipline. Grace works with our effort to produce virtue. If we live reckless lives, or act with malice and bitterness, it's as if we have never been saved. Our welcome into the eternal kingdom will hinge on whether we have walked the talk, persisted in the faith, and loved the brothers and sisters. In the context of a lazy faith, then this is hard; the faith you finish with is as important as the one you started with, being persistent, longing for transformation, falling short but pressing on to maturity. It is not enough simply to have the pentecostal power, one also needs virtue.

Take the virtue of self-control. This seems a rather mute response to an audacious gift of divine power. We should indeed go for that power, but some of the most charismatic figures have been defeated in one unguarded moment: Moses striking the rock in anger and frustration; Esau selling his birthright because he couldn't wait to satisfy his hunger; David as he summons Bathsheba to his room after watching her bathing naked. Self-control is crucial – it will keep you and save you. Human effort is inadequate, but it is indispensable in your progress in the life of faith.

- 1) Have you come to faith? Do you have the life of the Holy Spirit in you?
- 2) Are you still pressing on, or have you settled for mediocrity?
- 3) Will you make love your highest goal? Love is not simply one of the virtues; it is what makes sense of the rest. Love will demonstrate whose we are.