

# THE PROGRESS OF FAITH

by John MacArthur, Grace Community Church

---

*This is an excerpt from The Quest for Character, copyright 2006.*

---

## THE PROGRESS OF FAITH

Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:5–8).

## FAITH

The Beatitudes outline the essential characteristics of true faith. Because they describe the citizens of Christ's kingdom, and entry into the kingdom is through faith alone, the Beatitudes in effect show us what the nature of faith is and what the fruit of authentic faith looks like.

Faith is the most essential aspect of true character. In fact, it is the basic foundation of every other virtue. No wonder we often say the person who lacks character is *unfaithful*.

*"Giving all diligence, add to your faith . . ." (2 Peter 1:5).* If you want to cultivate the kind of character that pleases and honors God, faith is the primary and nonnegotiable prerequisite. Hebrews 11:6 says, "Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him." One of the earliest and most important biblical descriptions of the way sinners are justified before God is found in Genesis 15:6: "[Abraham] believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness."

FAITH IS THE MOST ESSENTIAL ASPECT OF  
TRUE CHARACTER . . . IT IS THE BASIC  
FOUNDATION OF EVERY OTHER VIRTUE.

The apostle Paul quotes that verse in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6. Both times he uses the verse to show that faith is the essential instrument by which sinful people can lay hold of God's forgiveness and blessing. It is the means through which perfect righteousness is "accounted" to them in the reckoning of God.

*John MacArthur Jr. is a pastor and author known for his internationally syndicated Christian teaching radio program Grace to You. He has been the pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, since February 9, 1969. He is also the current president of The Master's University in Newhall, California, and The Master's Seminary in Los Angeles, California.*

What is this righteousness that is “reckoned” to the faithful? Scripture says repeatedly that it is the perfect righteousness of God made possible by Christ (Romans 3:22; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 3:9). Our faith unites us with Christ in a spiritual union whereby His life counts as our life and His perfect, flawless righteousness accrues to our eternal benefit and blessing.

Just as Christ took the sins of His people and paid for our guilt in full, so the full merit of His righteousness is written to our account in the divine reckoning. In biblical terms, righteousness is imputed to them (Romans 4:22–24).

It’s a perfect exchange of the sinner’s guilt for Christ’s righteousness. It’s also a perfect spiritual union with Him, so that all who are united with Him by faith share in His life as well as His death (Romans 6:3–5). His death pays in full the penalty of our sin, and His life provides all the righteousness we need for a perfect standing before the judgment throne of God. That is what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” In other words, on the cross God treated Christ as if He had committed all the sins of every person who would ever believe in Him, so that He could treat them as if they lived Christ’s perfect life.

That is what Scripture refers to as *justification*. It explains how sinners are forgiven and accepted in the courtroom of God without any condemnation (Romans 8:1) and yet without any compromise of divine justice (1 John 1:10). That’s why faith is the starting point of the Christian life, as well as the foundation of true character.

ON THE CROSS GOD TREATED CHRIST AS  
IF HE HAD COMMITTED ALL THE SINS OF  
EVERY PERSON WHO WOULD EVER  
BELIEVE IN HIM, SO THAT HE COULD  
TREAT THEM AS IF THEY LIVED CHRIST’S  
PERFECT LIFE .

The one true object of genuine saving faith is Christ, as He is revealed in Scripture. Christ Himself said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (John 5:24).

As we are about to see, faith in Christ is the necessary underpinning for every other virtue of godly character. So before we move on, make sure this most vital prerequisite is settled in your own heart and mind: Do you have authentic faith in Christ?

## VIRTUE

Although faith is the first and most essential quality of godly character, it is not the only one. Faith simply establishes the necessary framework for every other authentic virtue.

On the one hand, it is crucial to understand faith as something distinct from “good works.” As we saw in the previous chapter, faith is the one essential quality without which it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6), while “good works” *never* earn us any merit with God. Much less can our own works purchase (or contribute anything to) atonement, salvation, or forgiveness from our own sin: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9).

On the other hand, it is dangerous to imagine that faith can ever exist in isolation from the good works that are its inevitable fruit, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). “Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:17).

So while we understand and stress that faith in Christ alone is the sole instrument by which we lay hold of

forgiveness and full justification, we are not to imagine that true godly character consists in faith by itself apart from other virtues.

The apostle Peter makes this point in 2 Peter 1:5-8, where he urges believers to give all diligence to add other excellent qualities to the faith by which they first laid hold of Christ: “*Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue*” (v. 5).

VIRTUE DOESN'T COME NATURALLY.  
IT ISN'T SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS  
TO PASSIVE PEOPLE. IT  
REQUIRES DILIGENCE .

“Virtue” in that text is translated from a Greek word that speaks of moral excellence. The word is used only four times in the New Testament. Three of the four usages come from the pen of Peter, and two of them appear in this one verse.

Paul uses the word once, in Philippians 4:8, where it is likewise translated “virtue”: “Brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.”

That text essentially equates “virtue” with everything praiseworthy. Moreover, the specific characteristics listed in Philippians 4:8 give us a catalog of qualities that define the multifaceted concept of “virtue”: truth, nobility, justice, purity, beauty, and everything good. That would cover everything honorable—from good manners and hospitality in our dealings with others, to righteous thoughts and contentment in the privacy of our own minds.

Add such qualities to your faith, Peter says. Not only that, but be *diligent* to do so. Virtue doesn't come naturally. It isn't something that happens to passive people. It requires diligence.

In other words, while recognizing that we are justified through faith alone apart from any works we do, Peter also recognizes that justifying faith should never remain alone. “Add to your faith,” he says.

There is no shortcut to Christlike character. If virtue could be instantly ours through some sort of passive, instantaneous, supernatural faith experience, Peter would have urged us to seek that experience. He doesn't. He commands diligence and describes a process of gradual sanctification whereby we are increasingly conformed to the image of Christ as we exercise diligence in the cultivation of personal virtues.

THERE IS NO SHORTCUT TO  
CHRISTLIKE CHARACTER.

That's the way the Christian life is supposed to be, as we are gradually changed “from glory to glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18). Don't be frustrated by the process. Embrace it and be diligent to see it through to the end.

KNOWLEDGE

The next item on Peter's list of moral assets may surprise you: “*Add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge*” (2 Peter 1:5). Have you ever thought of knowledge as an aspect of godly character? It is.

Now, it's true that knowledge apart from love tends to make a person arrogant (1 Corinthians 8:1). But sinful self-centeredness—not knowledge, per se—is the evil behind that kind of pride.

There is certainly no inherent value or virtue in ignorance. Ignorance is the currency of fools. It is often closely related to sin—both as a cause and as a consequence of evil. Sin makes us spiritually dull,

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OF  
KNOWLEDGE: AS AN ASPECT OF  
GODLY CHARACTER? IT IS.

and that is the reason for our frequent lapses into spiritual stupidity. Paul spoke of those who walk “in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart” (Ephesians 4: 17–18). Their sin causes spiritual blindness; the blindness causes a darkening of their understanding; and the ignorance that results breeds even more sin.

You see a clear example of ignorance causing sin and self-righteousness in the case of those described in Romans 10:3, who “being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.”

*Innocence*, on the other hand, is indeed a virtue. Paul wrote, “I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil” (Romans 16:19). In 1 Corinthians 14: 20, he gave a similar admonition: “Do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.” Notice how Paul’s plea for childlike innocence is actually sandwiched between two commands to be grown-ups when it comes to understanding the truth.

Knowledge and understanding are the only antidotes to spiritual ignorance. Therefore, says Peter, cultivate knowledge because ignorance actually undermines true character.

This is an admonition well-suited for the shallow and anti-intellectual age in which we live. Lots of people are conditioned to think there’s something carnal about the intellect. In the common perception, “spirituality” is supposed to be a state of pseudoconsciousness where the intellect is disengaged and the feelings rule. That is not a biblical perspective.

In fact, Jesus Himself established the virtue of true knowledge when He said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). Unless we apprehend the truth with our minds, it cannot begin

to set us free.

In contrast to the people who disregard knowledge, others in our age believe intellect goes hand in hand with sophistication. They think science and philosophy always trump faith. Some even think modern knowledge has done away with the need for faith. Such people often consider Christians to be unsophisticated or foolish because we profess a real, relevant, living God. But 2 Peter 1:5 admonishes Christians to be exactly what many in the modern world say we’re not: knowledgeable.

In Proverbs 1:28–29, God describes the plight of the wicked: “They will seek me diligently, but they will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD.” There’s nothing “spiritual” about closing one’s mind to knowledge. In fact, that is a sure way to incur God’s displeasure. But “[Study to show] yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

As we have been stressing, the growth process outlined in 2 Peter 1:5–7 must begin with faith. But the rest of Peter’s list of virtues should not be considered a chronological checklist—as if we had to finish one item before moving on to the next. Peter isn’t suggesting that we first add virtue to our faith, and then when we’ve finally perfected the issue of personal virtue, we can take up the issue of knowledge. Knowledge must be added as a part of the cultivation of virtue, because knowledge itself is a virtue and one of the essential features of godly character.

IGNORANCE IS THE CURRENCY OF  
FOOLS. IT IS OFTEN CLOSELY RELATED  
TO SIN—BOTH AS A CAUSE AND  
AS A CONSEQUENCE OF EVIL.

KNOWLEDGE MUST BE . . . PART OF  
THE CULTIVATION OF VIRTUE.