

GROWING IN GODLINESS

2 Peter 1:5-7

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INTRODUCTION

2 Peter 1:5-7 “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, 6 knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with godliness, 7 godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.”

The title of this sermon is “Growing in Godliness.” So far in this list of virtues we have looked at faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, and endurance. Today we’re going to study the virtue of godliness.

It’s that time of year. People all over America are getting serious about their physical fitness. People are going to be giving up their favorite foods; going on very strict diets; waking up early to exercise; spending hours each week at the gymnasium; paying hundreds of dollars for a gym membership, and even more on exercise clothes and equipment; and putting their bodies through hell in order to get in shape, feel better, and look better. I’m a member of Cajun Fitness, and it’s impressive to see how many people show up at the gym at the same day every day, rain or shine, warm or cold. Such dedication.

Sadly, these people at the gym put more effort into their physical fitness than most Christians put into their spiritual fitness. Even worse, most Christians who are conscientious about their physical fitness are much more dedicated to their health and physical appearance than they are to their spiritual health.

And this is nothing new. Back in the 19th century, a preacher by the name of **Alexander MacLaren** wrote, “It is a miserable thing to think that so many professing Christians will give a great deal more pains to learn to play lawn tennis than ever they did to learn to be good, Christian people.”¹ MacLaren was preaching on **1 Timothy 4:7-8** “7 But have nothing to do with pointless and silly myths. Rather, train yourself in godliness. 8 For the training of the body has

¹ Alexander MacLaren's Expositions of Holy Scripture.

limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.” **MacLaren** went to say, “The Apostle’s notion is that, just as the athlete, racer, or boxer goes through a course of training, so there is a training as severe, necessary for the godliness which Paul regards as the one true aim of life. You Christian people ought to train your spirits at least as carefully as the athlete does his muscles. There are plenty of people, calling themselves Christians, who never give one-hundredth part as much systematic and diligent pains to fulfil the ideal of their Christian life as men will take to learn to ride a bicycle or to pull the stroke oar in a college boat. The self-denial and persistence and concentration which are freely spent upon excellence in athletic pursuits might well put to shame the way in which Christians go about the task of ‘doing’ their religion.”

The point of 1 Timothy 4:7-8 is that the Christian should put far more effort and dedication and thought into spiritual fitness than to physical fitness. Why? Not just because it is the right thing to do, but because it is more beneficial. “The training of the body,” Paul writes, “has limited benefit.” But “godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”

I don’t want to discourage you from taking care of your physical fitness. I think that is very important. Your body belongs to God, and taking care of your physical fitness is one way that you should glorify God with your body. But your spiritual fitness, or godliness, is much more important. And so today we’re going to talk about training in godliness.

5 BIBLICAL TRUTHS ABOUT GODLINESS

What does the Bible say about godliness? Here are five biblical truths.

1. Godliness is God’s will for every Christian.

We are commanded to train ourselves for godliness. **1 Timothy 4:7** “But have nothing to do with pointless and silly myths. Rather, train yourself in godliness.”

We are commanded to pursue godliness. **1 Timothy 6:11** “But you, man of God, flee from these things, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness.”

We are commanded to make every effort to cultivate godliness. **2 Peter 1:3-7** “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with godliness”

Godliness is the goal of Christian preaching. **Titus 1:1** “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness”

We should be people in holy conduct and godliness. **2 Peter 3:11** “Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, it is clear what sort of people you should be in holy conduct and godliness”

Godliness is not just for some; it’s for all. It is not just for some Christians; it’s for all Christians. It’s not just for Christians who have a lot of extra time on their hands; it’s for Christians who are extremely busy. It’s not just for adult Christians; it’s for Christians who are children and youth. It’s not just for full-time homemakers and retirees; it is for Christians who are in the workforce, the marketplace, the business world. Godliness is not just for pastors; it is for every member of the church. Godliness is for grandparents, and new parents, and married people, and singles; it is for middle school students, and high school students, and college students. It is for manly men, and girly girls. Godliness is for people in their teens, and twenties, and thirties, and forties, and fifties, and sixties, and seventies. Godliness is for new Christians and seasoned Christians. It is not optional. It is not a suggestion. It is not a word of advice. It is a command.

2. Godliness is possible for every Christian.

I have some really good news for you. You can become a godly person. You don’t have to be defeated by sin. You can break those sinful habits and patterns. You can overcome alcoholism. You can overcome drug addiction. You can overcome your cursing habit, your smoking habit, your dipping habit. You can overcome pornography. You can become a kind person. A gentle person. A patient person.

You can overcome worry and develop a joyful, peaceful attitude. You can overcome laziness. You can become a self-disciplined person. In short, you can become godly. You can become like Christ.

How do I know? Because the Bible tells me so. God has given us everything required for godliness. **2 Peter 1:3** “His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.” If you have a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ Jesus, if you have been born again, if you are saved, then God has already given you all that you need to become godly.

3. Godliness should be the Christian’s priority.

1 Timothy 4:7 commands us to train ourselves for godliness. The Greek word for “train” means strenuous exertion, like a person training in a gymnasium. So the same effort and discipline that an athlete puts in to training his body, Christians are to put into their growth in godliness.

1 Timothy 6:11 commands us to pursue godliness. The Greek word for “pursue” means unrelenting, persevering effort.

2 Peter 1:5-7 commands us to make every effort to cultivate godliness.

It is clear that not only is godliness a command, but it should be a priority. Godliness is not something you work on after you do everything else; it’s something you do first. **Matthew 6:33** “But seek first thing kingdom of God and his righteousness.” It’s not something you do when you have time for it; it is something you make time for. **Ephesians 5:15-16** “5 Pay careful attention, then, to how you live—not as unwise people but as wise— 16 making the most of the time, because the days are evil.” Training in godliness is the only way to make the most of your time.

Training godliness is more important than anything else. It is more important than your finances, your career, your education, your marriage, your children, your hobbies, and your physical health.

You only have so much time and energy. How many Christians spend so much time and energy on other pursuits that they don't have time and energy to train for godliness? They are too tired to wake early for a quiet time. They are too busy to make time for church. Their schedule is too full to stop and pray. They have too much work to make time for spiritual reading. They work so long and hard at their job that they don't have any time and energy to devote to discipling their kids when they get home. Godliness should be the Christian's priority.

4. Godliness is not cultivated easily.

Let's look once again at the language used in Scripture for the cultivation of godliness. We are commanded to train ourselves for godliness (strenuous exertion.) We are commanded to pursue godliness (unrelenting, persevering effort). We are commanded to make every effort to grow in godliness. Why are we to put so much energy and effort into growing in godliness? Not just because it is more important than anything else, but because it demands our best effort. You will not become a godly person unless you are totally dedicated to becoming a godly person. If you give 50% effort into cultivating godliness, you will be 100% ungodly. Growth in godliness takes 110% effort.

Your flesh craves sin. It longs to feel the pleasures and comforts offered by this world. And the world around you is submerged in sin. The world is constantly offering you ways and means and opportunities to engage in sin. And the devil is smarter than you. He is scheming against you. He has a battle plan tailor made for you. He is tempting you at every turn. He knows your weaknesses, your cravings, your lusts, your inclinations, your proclivities. He knows when you are alone; when you are weak; when you are vulnerable. He knows the best time and the best way to tempt you. He has developed the very best traps for you. He has laid out the most irresistible bait for you. Unless you are all in, totally committed, fully dedicated, completely focused on godliness, then not only will you not grow in godliness, but you will continue to become more and more sinful with each passing day.

Growing in godliness requires every effort. **Jeremiah 29:13** "You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart." **1 Corinthians 9:27** "Instead, I discipline my body and bring it under strict control, so that after preaching to others, I myself will not be disqualified."

Throughout the New Testament we find phrases like “make every effort,” “be alert,” “stand firm” repeated over and over again. We are commanded to make every effort to enter through the narrow door (Lk 13:14); to keep the unity of the church (Eph 4:3); to become like Christ (Phil 3:12); to enter the rest of Christ (Heb 4:11); to cultivate the virtues (2 Peter 1:5-7); to confirm our calling and election (2 Peter 1:10); to be found without spot or blemish in His sight (2 Peter 3:14); to be found at peace with one another (2 Peter 3:14). Christianity is a war. It is a fierce battle. It is a battle for your soul: Will it be ruled by God, or by sin. If you are a casual Christian, you will be a carnal Christian. If you are a lazy Christian, you will be a lousy Christian.

5. Godliness has unlimited benefits.

1 Timothy 4:8 “For the training of the body has limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”

Godliness requires all of your effort. It is costly. It demands sacrifice. It requires strict self-discipline. It necessitates constant self-denial. It affords no breaks. But it is worth it. The rewards far outweigh the cost.

Unlike physical exercise, which has but limited benefits, godliness has unlimited benefits. It is beneficial in every way. It benefits us in this life, and in the life to come. Godliness benefits you when you are sick or healthy; when you are rich or poor; when you are married or single; when you are a kid or a grandparent. Godliness benefits your mind, your body, your soul, your emotions. Godliness benefits you at home, at work, when you are alone, and when you are surrounded by people. Godliness benefits you in wartime and in peace time. It benefits you in every season of life. It benefits you in the prime of your life, or on your deathbed. Your godliness benefits you, and everyone who interacts with you. Your children, spouse, family, friends, coworkers, community, and nation will benefit from your godliness.

The Bible mentions some of the benefits of godliness. It leads to contentment (1 Tim 6:6). It is great gain (1 Tim 6:6). God will be your shield (Ps 5:12). God will make you stand like a strong mountain (Ps 30:7). God will give you

victory/success (Ps 44:3; Ps 90:17). You will grow in intimacy with God (Ps 101:6). You will have an effective prayer life (1 Jn 3:22).

WHAT IS GODLINESS?

Let's now look into the definition of godliness and how to cultivate it.

The Greek word is *eusebeia*. It is used 15 times in the New Testament. The **Expository Dictionary of Bible Words** (Hendrickson) says that godliness means "devotion to God characterized by a life of conformity to his will, or godly living."

On the definition of godliness, I have learned much from the writings of late Jerry Bridges, the author of the book *The Practice of Godliness*. Bridges defines godliness as **devotion in action**. A longer definition is that godliness is **devotion to God resulting in a life that is pleasing to Him**. So godliness has two elements. Devotion to God, or an intimate love relationship with God. And a life that is pleasing to God.

Jerry Bridges points to Enoch as an example of godliness. Enoch was one of the only two people in history who never died; the other was Elijah. In Genesis 5:21-24, it says two times in three verses that Enoch walked with God. He had an intimate love relationship with God. A close friendship with God. **Genesis 5:24** "Enoch walked with God; then he was not there because God took him." And then in Hebrews 11, the "Hall of Faith," it describes Enoch as one who pleased God. **Hebrews 11:5** "By faith Enoch was taken away, and so he did not experience death. He was not to be found because God took him away. For before he was taken away, he was approved as one who pleased God."

Let us look more closely at each of these elements of godliness.

Godliness is an attitude of devotion to God, or an intimate love relationship with God. Where does this devotion come from? Jerry Bridges says that it comes from three things. Picture a triangle. At the top is desire for God. And the two corners at the bottom are the fear of God, and the love of God. Bridges says that as you grow in the fear of God, and understand the love of God, then your desire for God will grow, making you more and more devoted to God.

THE MOTIVATIONS FOR DEVOTION TO GOD

1. The fear of God.

The theologian **John Murray** said, "The fear of God is the soul of godliness."

Jerry Bridges points out that the "fear of God" means two different things. On the one hand, it means anxious dread; on the other it means veneration, reverence, and awe. "Fear as anxious dread is produced by the realization of God's impending judgment upon sin. When Adam sinned he hid from God because he was afraid."² As Christians we have been delivered from God's wrath by the blood of Jesus, and so we no longer need to fear eternal torment. But we haven't been delivered from God's hand of discipline when His children go astray, and so we still have reason to have an anxious dread of God, just like child fears his father. This is why are commanded to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12).

But as children of God, the primary meaning of the fear of God is that of veneration, reverence, and awe. Wonder. Adoration. The focus is not on the wrath of God but on the greatness of God.

2. The love of God.

The second motivation for devotion to God is the love of God. I am not speaking about our love for God, but our comprehension of God's love for us, especially as demonstrated by the cross of Jesus Christ for our sins.

In Ephesians 3:18-19, Paul prayed for the Ephesian church would be able to "comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God's love, and to know Christ's love that surpasses all knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

How do you grow in your appreciation of the love of God? First, you have to grow in your understanding of God's will; His standard; His law. The more clearly you see yourself compared to God's standard of holiness and righteousness, the more sinful, and unworthy, and undeserving you will see yourself. The more you will

² Jerry Bridges, The Practice of Godliness

see how much you deserve eternal torment in hell. And second, you must grow in your understanding of the gospel. That even though we were sinners, hostile enemies of God, God loved us and sent His Son to be crucified in order to save us. And for those who are united with Christ by faith, God's love is constant and unchanging. God may discipline us when we sin, but He will never love us less; He will never abandon us.

Jerry Bridges wrote, "It is not enough to believe that God loved the world. I must be gripped by the realization that God loves me, a specific person. It is this awareness of his individual love that draws out our hearts in devotion to him." "The more he grows in his knowledge of God's perfect will, the more he sees his own sinfulness, and the more he comprehends God's love in sending Christ to die for him. And the more he sees God's love, the more his heart reaches out in adoring devotion to the One who loved him so."

3. The desire for God.

As you grow in the fear of God and in your understanding of the love of God, then your desire for God will grow. You will come to the place where you want nothing more than to know God more, and be close to Him, and to please Him, and to serve Him. **Jerry Bridges** wrote, "As we contemplate God more and more in his majesty, holiness, and love, we will be progressively led to the apex of the triangle of devotion—the desire for God himself. True godliness engages our affections and awakens within us a desire to enjoy God's presence and fellowship. It produces a longing for God himself."

We see this desire in the Psalms of David. **Psalm 42:1-2** "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so I long for you, God. I thirst for God, the living God. When can I come and appear before God?" **Psalm 63:1-2** "God, you are my God; I earnestly seek you. I thirst for you; my body faints for you in a land that is dry, desolate, and without water. So I gaze on you in the sanctuary to see your strength and glory."

Jerry Bridges wrote, "This is devotion to God—the fear of God, which is an attitude of reverence and awe, veneration and honor toward him, coupled with an apprehension deep within our souls of the love of God for us, demonstrated preeminently in the atoning death of Christ. These two attitudes complement and

reinforce each other, producing within our souls an intense desire for this One who is so awesome in his glory and majesty, and yet so condescending in his love and mercy.”

This desire causes us to seek an intimate friendship with God. To walk with God as closely as possible.

THE RESULT OF DEVOTION TO GOD

So godliness begins with devotion – the desire for God that is motivated by the fear of God and the love of God. But it does not end with desire. It does not end with a close friendship with God. What is the natural result of devotion to God? A life that is pleasing to God. **2 Corinthians 5:9** “Therefore, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to be pleasing to him.”

The **Expository Dictionary of Bible Words** (Hendrickson) says that godliness means “devotion to God characterized by a life of conformity to his will, or godly living.” The **NIV Zondervan Study Bible** defines godliness as pleasing God in every phase of life. **John MacArthur** defines godliness as living reverently, loyally, and obediently toward God. I like how **Charles Stanley** defines godliness: “A life no longer seeking satisfaction through a sinful lifestyle, but is now surrendered to God and His will for your life. A sanctified life. Not perfect. But your life is fully surrendered to God.” **William Law**, a pastor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, wrote, “Devotion signifies a life given, or devoted, to God. He therefore is the devout [godly] man who lives no longer to his own will, or the way and spirit of the world, but to the sole will of God; who considers God in everything, who serves God in everything, who makes all the parts of his common life parts of piety [godliness], by doing everything in the name of God, and under such rules as are conformable to his Glory.”³

HOW TO CULTIVATE GODLINESS?

1. Learn and focus on God’s attributes of greatness and goodness.

Let’s remember what godliness is. It is devotion to God resulting in a life that is pleasing to Him. And where does the devotion come from? It comes from the

³ Law, William. *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.

fear of God, or a Biblical understanding of the greatness of God, and an understanding of the love of God. This leads to a desire for God that leads to a devoted, intimate relationship with God. Understanding leads desire, which leads to intimacy.

So the foundation for godliness is the Bible. You need to study the Bible to better understand God's greatness and goodness. You will learn the Bible on Sunday mornings. But you also need to read the Bible continuously on your own. You need to get into the habit of reading Scripture on a daily basis. You can find several Bible reading plans at our church website. As you read, ask this question: "What does passage teach about God?" The goal is to learn about God as you read; learn His attributes; His character; His ways.

2. Spend time working on your friendship with God.

Jerry Bridges writes, "So often we try to develop Christian character and conduct without taking the time to develop God-centered devotion. We try to please God without taking the time to walk with him and develop a relationship with him. This is impossible to do."

In other words, godly conduct is the natural result of an intimate friendship with God. Your relationship with God, your love for God, is what will give you the strength and the motivation to please Him; to obey Him; to deny yourself.

How do you work on your relationship with God? Time. You have to learn to spend time with God. Alone time. Just you and God. You have to develop a conversational relationship with God. You need to spend time praying with Him. Ultimately you want to hold a conversation with God all day long, but the foundation for an intimate relationship with God is a daily quiet time – a time each day when you get alone with God to talk to Him.

What do you talk to God about? I like to use the prayer acronym A.C.T.S. Adoration – praise God for His attributes of goodness and greatness. Confession – confess and repent of your sins. Thanksgiving – thank God for the blessings in your life. Supplication – Pray for your needs and the needs of others.

Jerry Bridges wrote, “It is impossible to build a Christian behavior pattern without the foundation of a devotion to God. The practice of godliness is first of all the cultivation of a relationship with God, and from this the cultivation of a life that is pleasing to God. Our concept of God and our relationship with him determine our conduct.”

3. Using God’s word, identify and destroy any and all sin in your life.

Next, it’s time to focus on the second aspect of godliness, that of pleasing God. Godliness is not just devotion to God, or an intimate walk with God; it is devotion to God that results in a life that is pleasing to God.

At this point I appreciate the counsel of **Arthur W. Pink**, a theologian who died in 1952. He said, “If you have been genuinely converted, then your first concern must be to form all the details of your life—in the home, in the church, in the world—so as to please God. And in the actual bringing of this to pass, the order will be “cease to do evil; learn to do well” (Isaiah 1:16, 17); “Depart from evil, and do good” (Psalm 34:14 and cf. 37:27). There has to be a breaking down, before there can be a building up (Eccl. 3:3). There has to be an emptying of self, before there is the filling of the Spirit. There has to be an unlearning, before there is a true learning. And there has to be an hating the “evil,” before there is loving of the “good” (Amos 5:15 and cf. Romans 12:9).⁴

Notice what he is saying. In the quest for godliness, before you focus on doing all the things God wants you to do, start with the things that God wants you to stop doing. Start with the biggest, most obvious sins. For one person it might be getting drunk; for another it might be pre-marital sex; for another it might be drugs; for another it might be pornography; and for another it might be dirty language.

As you read God’s word each day, another question you should be asking is, “Is there a sin to avoid?” And as you encounter a prohibition in the Bible, obey. Then God point out another prohibition, and another, and another, and you will gradually grow in godliness.

4. Using God’s word, identify and obey all of God’s commands.

⁴ Arthur Pink (1886-1952), Practical Godliness

The final step in the cultivation of godliness is using God's word, identify and obey all of God's commands. God's word is filled not just with prohibitions, but obligations. The Christian life is not just a bunch "Don'ts," but also a bunch of "Do's." So as you read your Bible each day, a third question to ask is, "Is there a command to obey, or an example to follow?"

Writing in 1859, a pastor named **James Smith** wrote, "Now comes the question: are we godly? Has the Holy Spirit regenerated, renewed, or new created us? Is sin the object of our detestation and abhorrence? Is holiness, in our estimation, the beauty of the Divine nature, and the ruling desire of our souls? Do we desire, pray, and daily strive, to be as like God as possible, as a God of truth, justice, mercy, holiness, and love? Do we produce an impression upon all with whom we have any dealings, that we are God's people? That is to say, that God has our hearts, our talents, our all, to use for his glory and praise."⁵

CONCLUSION

Jerry Bridges wrote, "NO higher compliment can be paid to a Christian than to call him a godly person. He might be a conscientious parent, a zealous church worker, a dynamic spokesman for Christ, or a talented Christian leader; but none of these things matters if, at the same time, he is not a godly person."

This year there is nothing better that you can do with your time and energy and resources than to train yourself in godliness. It is beneficial in every way; in this life, and in the one to come.

⁵ James Smith, The Power of Godliness, 1859