

“How Much Religion is Enough?”

2 Peter 1:1-8 ¹

Today we come to the letter we know as Second Peter, a short letter of just three chapters, each of which is quite interesting in its own way. Chapter 1, which we’ll consider today, talks about spiritual growth. Chapter 2, one of the most obscure chapters in the New Testament, talks about judgment. And chapter 3 offers encouragement about the Final End of All Things. I encourage you to read the whole letter this afternoon!

The verses Pastor Andrew read earlier that are the background for this morning’s message focus on a list of eight virtues that begin with faith and end with love. Building one upon the other, these qualities of faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, brotherly affection, and love, form a “chain” or a “ladder” of virtues similar to other lists in the New Testament and suggesting a progression of character qualities related to spiritual growth.²

Such lists were frequently used in the ancient world as mnemonic devices to assist students in learning, and many of us use acronyms and similar tools to remember things today. It’s also noteworthy that Peter urges his readers to “*make every effort*” to add these character qualities one to the other, emphasizing that spiritual progress requires focused and continued effort. Spiritual maturity doesn’t happen by accident.

One way to approach this text might be to look at each of these character qualities in turn, and I’ve done that on other occasions. What I hope to do this morning, though, is to offer some ideas about what spiritual maturity looks like “in the wild”—in our everyday lives.³

Before I try to do that, I’m sure you’ve noticed that our world is chock-full of religion. Out of the 7,800,000,000 people in the world today, nearly seven billion are affiliated in some way with the major religions of the world.⁴ Cathedrals, mosques, temples, synagogues, churches and shrines clutter the architectural landscape of the world.

And our own nation is among the most religious countries of the world. Somewhere between sixty-four and eighty-seven percent of us say we believe in a higher power of some sort,⁵ and about twenty percent of us go to some kind of religious service every week.⁶ Some of us attend worship every day, while others are content with once or twice a year.

While some persons organize their lives around their religious commitments, others are only marginally religious. Content with their baptism as infants or as children, their relationship with religion is one of benign neglect, and all they hope for is to maintain “good credit” for the life to come.

Well, spiritual maturity is, after all, intended to prepare a person both for this life and for the life to come. So how much religion does it take to do what religion is supposed to do? If we look for evidence that Peter’s “chain of virtues” is under development in a person’s life—especially our own lives—what does that look like? **How much religion is “enough”?**⁷

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on October 18, 2020.

² See also Galatians 5:19-23; James 3:13-18; Titus 3:1-7; 1 Timothy 1:9-10, 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 3:2-5

³ This sermon is indebted in large part to my good friend, Dr. Dwight Moody, who delivered a similar sermon on June 10, 1984, when he was pastor of the North Park Baptist Church in Pittsburgh.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_religious_populations

⁵ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/268205/americans-believe-god.aspx>

⁶ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/245491/church-attendance-of-americans/>

⁷ Technically speaking, no amount of “religion” is ever going to be “enough.” To ask about “religion” is to ask the wrong question entirely.

I'm going to suggest three criteria—among many that could be offered—in answer to this question. The first criterion is that **“we need enough religion to make us quit our meanness,”** a statement that has been attributed to the great evangelist Billy Sunday. The point is that if our religion doesn't make us stop being ornery and selfish and hateful, we don't have enough of it. Real religion ought to clean up our act.

Long ago, when folks came to John the Baptist asking for baptism in the Jordan River, he told them, “Before I baptize you, you're going to have to show me that your faith has changed the way you live” (Matthew 3:8). John's point was that if your religion doesn't make a noticeable difference in your behavior, then your religion is not any good. You don't have enough of it (see James 2:14-26).

There is, after all, a reason why the Bible calls being *born again* the entrance into “a new life” (2 Corinthians 5:17). It's because God means for our old habits to be replaced by new patterns of behavior, and for old character qualities to be replaced by godly ones. Honesty replaces dishonesty. Kindness replaces meanness. Gentleness replaces anger, and decent speech replaces filthy talk.

Those of us who are fairly regular in worship and church activities have generally cleaned up our lives with respect to the more obvious moral offenses, but every single one of us still struggles with those failures of Christlikeness that are harder to see. Pastor Gordon MacDonald wrote a column on this topic during the huge eruption of the volcano in Iceland that shut down air travel across Europe a decade ago.⁸ I still can't pronounce the name of the volcano (Eyjafjallajökull), but here's what Gordon said about it:

“I grew up thinking I was a pretty calm person and that it was others—not I—who had anger issues. They might have a volcano inside of them, but my interior space, I believed, was an oasis of peace and order. . . . Then one day I discovered [such a volcano] within myself. I became embroiled in a disagreement that caused feelings to ignite in ways I'd never experienced before. All I can say is that I felt the volcanic power of rage. That disagreement captured my mind, and for many days I could hardly think of anything else but my desire to be vindicated and for the other party to be appropriately punished. . . .

“That memorable episode of conflict so many years ago became an important moment of self-discovery in my life. The other person in the engagement and the issue itself became insignificant. What really needed to be dealt with was my own rather large inventory of small and large matters I had simply stuffed and never dealt with. I realized I had some repenting and forgiving to do. I had to become a ‘volcanologist’ of the spirit, a student of the energy of anger within me: where it came from, how it expressed itself, and how it needed to be processed into something more in alignment with the grace and mercy Jesus so aptly modeled.”

The whole point of “religion”—whether Christian or otherwise—is the accumulation of such a preponderance of good works over bad that our higher power is compelled to bless us and welcome us into whatever afterlife we think is out there. But in order to engage such a religious project, we have to ignore Isaiah's warning that *“all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away”* (64:6).

In order to engage such a religious project, we have to ignore Jesus' clear statement that *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (John 14:6). And in order to engage such a religious project, we have to ignore Paul's exclamation that *“it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast”* (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Our goal, then, is not to “get religion,” “old-time” or otherwise. Our goal is to establish a personal relationship with God through Jesus of Nazareth in the power of the Holy Spirit, a relationship of love that over time makes us more and more like our Beloved, as happens when married couples begin to look more and more like each other with the passing of many decades. *That's our goal.*

⁸ Gordon MacDonald, “Our Inner Eyjafjallajökull,” www.leadershipjournal.net, 2010.

Hmmm. Can you see yourself in Gordon's confession? I can.

You know that I use what I call "**The Spirituality Test**" to get a sense about the condition of my heart, and I commend this test to you, as well. When I experience something sharply painful or distressing, like hitting my finger with a hammer or sticking myself with a pin, I pay attention to the uncensored exclamation that emerges from my mouth and to the thoughts that erupt unbidden in my mind. Those uncensored events are windows through which I can check out the spiritual shape of my heart.

One of the things the Bible says about what religion looks like when we have "enough" of it is this: "*Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you*" (Ephesians 4:31-32). So the first question for this morning is, **Do you have enough religion to make you quit your meanness?**

After having "enough religion to make us quit our meanness," the second criterion I suggest is that **we need enough religion to motivate us to serve the Lord**. Although surveys report that most Americans believe that God exists, and while we may go to church on Christmas, Easter, and for weddings and funerals, the fact that God exists has no real bearing on how they live our lives. If that's the case, we don't have "enough religion."

So how much religion is enough? Well, we have "enough religion" when we're motivated to organize our lives around building the Kingdom of God, which was the central theme of all that Jesus did and taught. We have "enough religion" when our commitment to God's Kingdom causes us to invest our resources—physical, mental, spiritual and financial—in Kingdom causes.

We have "enough religion" when we're growing in the eight character qualities Peter mentioned in our text.⁹ And we have "enough religion" when we're motivated to live in ways that express God's Love to others. Here are several stories that illustrate what that looks like.

Watchman Nee, the great Chinese pastor of a century ago, told a story about a Chinese Christian who owned a rice paddy adjacent to one owned by a communist man. The Christian irrigated his paddy by pumping water out of a canal, using a leg-operated pump that looks a little bit like an exercise bike.

But every day, after the Christian had pumped enough water to fill his field, the communist would come out, remove some boards that held the water in the Christian's field and let all the water run down into his own field. That way, he didn't have to pump. This continued day after day and week after week.

Finally, the Christian prayed, "Lord, if this keeps up, I'm going to lose all my rice, maybe even my field. I've got a family to care for. What can I do?" In answer to that prayer, the Lord put a new thought in his mind. So, the next morning he arose much earlier, before dawn, and pumped water into the field of his communist neighbor. Then he replaced the boards and pumped water into his own rice paddy. In a few weeks both fields of rice were doing well—and before long, his communist neighbor became a follower of Jesus.¹⁰ That's what "enough religion" looks like—the willingness to "go the second mile" with those who take advantage of us.

Dawson Trotman, founder of *The Navigators*, visited Taiwan on one of his overseas trips, and during the visit he hiked with a Taiwanese pastor back into one of the mountain villages to meet

⁹ These eight things are faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, brotherly affection, and love (2 Peter 1:5-7).

¹⁰ *Making Things Right When Things Go Wrong* (Howard, 1996)

with some of the Christians there. The roads and trails were wet, and their shoes became very muddy.

Years later, after Trotman's death (he drowned while saving someone else from drowning), someone asked this Taiwanese pastor what he remembered most about Dawson Trotman. Without hesitation the man replied, "He cleaned my shoes." "He cleaned my shoes." How surprised this humble pastor must have been to get up the next morning and see that the Christian leader from America had gotten up first and cleaned the mud from his shoes!¹¹ That's what "enough religion" looks like—a willingness to serve others even in menial ways.

Moving from Asia to Washington, D.C., when Dr. Howard Hendricks was pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church, the church hosted a father/son breakfast early one morning. After the meeting was dismissed, Dr. Hendricks was surprised to see Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield, one of the most senior Republicans in the Senate, stacking chairs and picking up trash on the floor. That's what "enough religion" looks like—a willingness to take the lowest place.¹²

When Emma Daniel Gray died in 2009, at the age of 95, *The Washington Post* ran a large story on her life, because she had been the person who cleaned the Oval Office for six Presidents of these United States. Mrs. Gray was a devout Christian who prayed over the President's chair every time she dusted it. She prayed for wisdom for the President, for safety, and for other blessings. That's what "enough religion" looks like—making every act an act of worship.¹³

That's what "enough religion" looks like. So our second question this morning is, **Do you have enough religion to motivate you to serve the Lord?**

Finally, authentic religion—"enough religion"—should not only clean up our behavior and focus our energies on building up the Kingdom of God. **We should also have "enough religion" to make us happy!**

Religion that is dreary and dull isn't worth having, though the truth of the matter is that many people do have that kind of religion. They have "just enough" religion to make them uncomfortable, guilty, miserable, and unhappy. They're afraid to deny God and to ignore Jesus, but they're also afraid to go far enough with Jesus to bring them any joy.

My friends, **God intends for those who follow Jesus to be joy-full!** No matter what else is happening, even in October of 2020, the Christian Way is a joyful Way! Even when he was locked up in prison, Paul instructed us to "*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*" (Philippians 4:4).

And Jesus told us that "*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. **I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete***" (John 15:9-11).

Jesus told us that His Joy is our Joy; and here's my favorite story about God's Joy. This comes from Dr. Dallas Willard:

While I was teaching in South Africa some time ago, a young man took me out to see the beaches near his home in Port Elizabeth. I was totally unprepared for the experience.

¹¹ Jerry Bridges, "Loving By Serving," *Discipleship Journal* (May/June 1985).

¹² Howard Hendricks, "The Problem of Discrimination," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 76.

¹³ Patricia Sullivan, "'Christian Lady' Cleaned for 6 Presidents," *The Washington Post* (6-21-09).

I had seen beaches, or so I thought. But when we came over the rise where the sea and land opened up to us, I stood in stunned silence and then slowly walked toward the waves. Words cannot capture the view that confronted me, and I suddenly realized that God sees this all the time. He sees it, experiences it, knows it from every possible point of view, this and billions of other scenes like and unlike it, in this and billions of other worlds. It seems to me that great tidal waves of joy must constantly wash through God's Being.

We pay a lot of money to get a tank with a few tropical fish in it and never tire of looking at their beauty; but God has oceans full of them to enjoy at every moment. We are enraptured by a well-done movie sequence or by a few bars from an opera or lines from a poem. We treasure our great experiences for a lifetime, and we may have only a few of them. But God is simply one Great Inexhaustible and Eternal Experience of All that is Good and True and Beautiful and Right.

All of the good and beautiful things from which we occasionally drink tiny droplets of soul-exhilarating joy, God continuously experiences in all their breadth and depth and richness. **God must be the most joy-full Being in the universe!**¹⁴

My friend, that's the JOY God wants for YOU!

Just think about this. When you and I have joy-full experiences in this life, we sometimes say, "I'd like this moment to never end, to go on forever"—but of course, it doesn't. But the message of the Gospel is that the day is going to come, once we've crossed over into the City of Light, that we'll say once more, "I want this to go on forever," and it WILL! Could there be any better news than this!¹⁵ So the third question for this morning is, **Do you have enough religion to make you happy?**

Well, so how do we get there from here? How do we secure enough religion to make us quit our meanness, to cause us to serve the Lord with gladness, and to give us inner joy that life's changing circumstances cannot destroy? Here are some ideas . . .

As you probably know, growing in Christlikeness is sometimes called "discipleship." Sometimes it's called "sanctification." Sometimes it's called "spiritual formation." But whatever it's called, this process begins with God's amazing grace that causes us to dare to believe that we really are loved.

That's why Zephaniah 3:17 has long been my favorite verse in the Bible: "*The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will comfort you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.*" That's where we begin; and happily, it's also where we end up—in God's Loving Presence in the eternal Kingdom of Light!

When we lived in Bristol, Tennessee, some of the guys in the church would get together from time to time to play golf. My feeble efforts motivated me to take some golf lessons, and as he taught me the fundamentals, Casey Barnes, my teacher, told me that he had just returned from watching the Masters Tournament in Augusta. As he watched the instruction being given to the very best golfers in the world, Casey was impressed that the pros frequently needed to be reminded about the same principles to which he was introducing me—the point being that we never get past practicing the fundamentals.

To say this is to say that the disciplines that lead to spiritual transformation, to spiritual maturity, to "enough religion" are well known. They include prayer, meditation, study, fasting—yes,

¹⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (HarperOne, 1998), pp. 62-64.

¹⁵ Steve DeWitt, *Eyes Wide Open: Enjoying God in Everything* (Credo House Publishers, 2012), p. 168.

even fasting—solitude, service, and worship, among others. As Richard Foster put it, “By undertaking the Disciplines of the spiritual life that we *can* do, we receive from God the ability to do things that under our own steam we simply *cannot* do, such as loving our enemies.

“The Disciplines . . . place us into the divine stream of things in such a way that God is able to build within us deeply ingrained habits of ‘*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*’ (Galatians 5:22-23).”¹⁶ And that’s also how we develop the qualities Peter lists for us this morning: faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, brotherly affection, and love.

And one of God’s very best gifts to us in addition to personal spiritual disciplines is life in the church itself. The fact of the matter is that spiritual strength, depth, and resilience don’t generally grow very much among friends we’ve chosen ourselves. God’s kind of love is best learned where we can’t be selective about our associates.

Perhaps this is why the two institutions established by God—the family and the Church—are structured as they are. You and I have no choice about who our parents or brothers or sisters will be; yet we are expected to love them and to serve them. Neither can we choose who will or will not be in the family of God; any person who confesses Jesus as Lord must be welcomed. Both situations often lead to aggravations of various sorts, aggravations that God used to polish up our character so that we look more and more like Jesus.¹⁷

Finally, we do well to remember that God’s process of spiritual transformation is very slow, sometimes hardly faster than the polishing of rocks in a stream. Because this is true, if we’re serious about making spiritual progress in 2020 and beyond, you and I must steadfastly choose to keep on keeping on, whether we perceive any progress at the moment or not.

There’s a reason for the slow pace of our growth. As Richard Foster noted, “On our own we are not sufficient receptacles to contain the divine Blessing. We would simply blow apart, or something worse. Therefore, we should always value this ordinary way (this intolerably slow way) of growth, for through it God prepares us for things we can hardly imagine.”¹⁸

So here are four summary principles that serve as today’s “bottom line” for the development of Christlike character:

- Remember that salvation is “*all* by Grace.” We are *saved* “by Grace, through Faith,” and in no other way;¹⁹ but *growth* comes through doing those things that lead to growth.
- The things that lead to growth are spiritual disciplines such as those I’ve just mentioned. Practice those disciplines “religiously.” Practice them until your meanness, bitterness, anger, and unforgiveness are transformed into faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, brotherly affection, and love.²⁰
- Stay actively engaged in the work of ministry, of serving others in Jesus’ Name, both within and beyond the Church. This is one of God’s primary ways of shaping character.

¹⁶ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, revised and expanded, HarperCollins, 1988, p. 88.

¹⁷ Marshall Shelley, “Developing Spiritual Fruit Requires Being Around People—Ordinary, Ornery People,” *Leadership Journal*, Spring 1993.

¹⁸ Foster, p. 91.

¹⁹ Ephesians 2:8-10

²⁰ AND transformed into love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

- Check your Joy-Meter often. If you are growing in Christlikeness, your life will be increasingly characterized by Joy—Joy that begins now and lasts . . . *forever*.

To have this much religion, my friends, is to have religion enough.

Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee,
God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flow'rs before Thee,
Op'ning to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;
Drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light of day!

All Thy works with joy surround Thee,
Earth and heav'n reflect Thy rays,
Stars and angels sing around Thee,
Center of unbroken praise.
Field and forest, vale and mountain,
Flow'ry meadow, flashing sea,
Singing bird and flowing fountain
Call us to rejoice in Thee.

Thou art giving and forgiving,
Ever blessing, ever blest,
Wellspring of the joy of living,
Ocean-depth of happy rest!
Thou our Father, Christ our Brother—
All who live in love are Thine;
Teach us how to love each other,
Lift us to the joy divine.

Mortals join the mighty chorus
Which the morning stars began;
Father-love is reigning o'er us,
Brother love binds man to man.
Ever singing, march we onward,
Victors in the midst of strife;
Joyful music leads us sunward
In the triumph song of life.

Henry van Dyke; Beethoven's *Hymn to Joy*