

Spiritual Growth – God’s Gracious Initiative, Our Earnest Response
Part 3 – Our Earnest Response: The Relationship Between Character and Diligence, 2 Peter 1:5-7

Review

- 2 Peter 1:3-4 – “His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”
- God shares himself generously so we may know him fully, the goal of spiritual formation.
- This work is initiated, sustained, and assured by God himself (cf. 1 Peter 1:3-4; Ephesians 2:8-10)
- God’s promises allow us to *participate in the divine nature* and *escape the corruption in the world that is caused by evil desire*.

Spiritual Formation: God’s Promises vs. False Promises¹

Formation Area	Shaped by God's Promises	Shaped by False Promises
Core Desires	Oriented toward Christ, shaped by love, joy, peace, and holiness	Distorted by idols like success, pleasure, approval, and control
Habits and Practices	Grounded in grace-driven disciplines that deepen dependence on God	Driven by performance, avoidance, image-management, or indulgence
Response to Truth	Enlightened, receptive, increasingly attuned to God's Word and Spirit	Desensitized, hardened, confused by lies and cultural narratives
Sense of Identity	Rooted in being God’s beloved, secure in Christ’s finished work	Built on fragile things like appearance, success, or others’ opinions
Vision of the Good Life	Focused on eternal joy and participation in the divine nature	Defined by temporal pleasures and self-realization
Response to Weakness	Grace-filled and hopeful, trusting in God’s sustaining power	Fearful, discouraged, or prideful depending on outcomes
End Goal of Formation	Christlikeness and participation in God’s nature (2 Peter 1:4)	Deformation into a distorted version of who God intended us to be

J. I. Packer: “There is unspeakable comfort in knowing that God is constantly taking knowledge of me in love, and watching over me for my good. There is tremendous relief in knowing that his love to me is utterly realistic, based at every point on his prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery can now disillusion him about me, in the way that I am so often disillusioned about myself, and quench his determination to bless me. There is, certainly, great cause for humility in the thought that He sees all the twisted things about me that my fellow human beings do not see (and I am glad!), and that He sees more corruption in me than that which I see in myself (which, in all good conscience, is enough). There is, however, equally great incentive to worship and love God in the thought that, for some unfathomable reason, He wants me as his friend, and desires to be my friend, and has given his Son to die for me in order to realize this purpose.”²

¹ Refined by author from ChatGPT, response to “Using the lesson outline, create a chart that describes the difference in our spiritual formation when we embrace God's promises vs. believing in false promises,” *OpenAI*, June 20, 2025.

² J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (IVP Books, 1993), 37.

Today's lesson text: "For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love." 2 Peter 1:5-7

Key Questions: If God has such a strong desire to be known, the question is how strong is my desire to know him? What is the relationship between divine initiative and human response in our spiritual growth?

Main point: Spiritual formation is cooperating with God's work in me, with disciplined energy, to become increasingly more godlike. Peter presents a dynamic model of formation that is:

- Motivated by grace (v. 5a)
- Characterized by disciplined effort (v. 5a)
- Designed for transformation (vv. 5b–7)

Motivated by Grace — "For this very reason..." (2 Peter 1:5a)

The phrase "For this very reason" is a pivotal hinge, going back to 1:3-4. It ties the believer's response directly to the gracious foundation already laid by God. God's power and promises not only rescue us from corruption but also enable us to "participate in the divine nature" – a call to a radically different life. They are not passive reassurances but formative truths that shape our desires, habits, and identity. This motivates us to respond actively. Our effort does not earn grace; it expresses trust in grace already given. It flows naturally from the security and abundance of what God has already done.

As N. T. Wright puts it, "Christian holiness is not about people trying to be what they're not. It's about God calling people to be what they truly are."³ God's initiative redefines us as new creatures in Christ; our response is to live into that identity. We are not striving to become something we are not; we are training ourselves to become what grace has already declared us to be. That declaration is not the end of the story, it's the beginning of formation. Because God has given us everything, we respond with everything.

In this way, 2 Peter 1:5 is not a pivot from grace to works, it is grace producing fruit. It is grace teaching us to say no to ungodliness (Titus 2:11–12), grace driving us to action. When we understand what God has already done — calling us, empowering us, giving us His nature — we find the deepest and most durable motivation for growth: not fear, not guilt, but gratitude and love.

Characterized by Disciplined Effort — "Make every effort..." (2 Peter 1:5a)

"Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning." – Dallas Willard⁴

Peter's phrase "make every effort," or "bend every energy to the task"⁵ emphasizes disciplined and habitual striving. Christian growth is not automatic; it requires active, intentional cultivation. The early church fathers described sanctification as a daily labor of grace, where effort is necessary but always motivated and supported by God's power.

³ N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 70.

⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 61.

⁵ William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, rev. ed., The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 310.

- Origen (c. 184–253): “God works with those who choose to be good; He cooperates with those who willingly embrace the life of virtue.”⁶ Origen viewed spiritual growth as the continuous partnership between God’s empowering presence and the soul’s intentional effort. He taught that grace is not imposed but draws forth our participation — an early articulation of synergy in spiritual formation.⁷
- Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395): “No limit can be set to our progress toward God... the soul’s desire for the divine is insatiable, because the more it tastes, the more it hungers.”⁸ Gregory’s image of growth is dynamic and ever-progressing. Based on Philippians 3:13-14, Gregory described Christian growth as *epektasis*, “stretching forth” or “straining toward” the infinite God. He viewed the Christian life as an upward climb toward greater participation in God’s nature. Because God is infinite, our journey of transformation is an unending, ever-deepening participation in His divine nature.
- John Cassian (c. 360–435): “We should not believe that our advancement depends entirely on our own strength, nor should we presume that it will come without any effort on our part. Both divine grace and human exertion must work together.”⁹ Cassian taught a balanced view of synergism: God’s grace is the foundation, but intentional, sustained practice is required.¹⁰
- Basil the Great (c. 330–379): “True piety is not achieved merely by hearing the word, but by doing what is commanded. The grace of the Spirit assists those who strive.”¹¹ Basil emphasized training the soul through disciplined repetition, aligned with the Spirit’s empowering presence. Repetition in spiritual practice is a vital means of formation, strengthening self-control and enabling us to choose lasting good over fleeting desires. Through sustained disciplines like prayer and solitude, the mind is purified, habits are reshaped, and the soul is gradually transformed in intimacy with God.
- Augustine of Hippo (354–430): “He who made you without your help will not justify you without your cooperation.”¹² Augustine affirmed that while grace is the origin of transformation, we must cooperate, respond, and yield to it.

These emphasize that formation is not automatic; it requires active, intentional cultivation. Christian growth is not passive waiting, nor self-reliant striving. It is a dynamic process: we respond energetically to God’s empowering presence.

Designed for Transformation — “Add to your faith, virtue...” (2 Peter 1:5b-7)

Peter outlines what have been called “The Christian Graces.” They are presented in a chain-like structure (sorites) where each virtue flows from the previous. They are not just ethical traits but markers of the divine life taking root. Each virtue reflects the reality of God sharing His nature with us and reshaping us.

⁶ Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth, Book III, Chapter 1 (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), 199.

⁷ See Joseph O’Leary, “Origen on Grace,” *Joseph O’Leary Homepage: Essays on Literary and Theological Themes*, December 10, 2006, https://josephsoleary.typepad.com/my_weblog/2006/12/origen_on_grace.html.

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, Book II (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 114.

⁹ John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), Conference 3, Chapter 19, 75.

¹⁰ In the history of Christian thought, synergism (*syn* – together; *ergon* – work) is contrasted to monergism (*monos* – one; *ergon* – work). Monergism, associated with John Calvin, places God as the sole agent in salvation. Synergism, associated with Jacob Arminius, teaches that salvation involves cooperation between God’s grace and human will.

¹¹ Basil the Great, *The Long Rules*, in *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, trans. M. Monica Wagner, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 9 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1950), Question 2, 230.

¹² Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will*, in *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 5 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 451.

The Christian Graces

Grace	Classical/Spiritual Meaning
Faith	The root—trust in Christ and the foundation of the Christian life.
Goodness (Virtue)	Moral excellence or courage; the <i>inner resolve</i> to do what is right. It is a pre-condition of the heart that motivates one to seek knowledge.
Knowledge	Practical wisdom. It includes head knowledge of what is true but goes to the level of insight that guides behavior.
Self-Control	Governing every impulse to express God’s will. Mastery over desires and emotional impulses. Foundational for spiritual freedom.
Perseverance	Steadfast endurance; the strength to remain faithful under trial.
Godliness	Reverence and devotion to God. Brings the sanctifying presence of God into every aspect of life. A practical awareness of God that seeks to please him from the deep interior of one’s life. Living before God as “the audience of One.”
Mutual Affection (Philia)	Brotherly love; warm, sacrificial concern for other believers and those within one’s regular, immediate social sphere.
Love (Agape)	The highest grace; unconditional self-giving love reflecting God’s own nature (cf. 1 John 4:8).

Their arrangement in the text has been understood in two different ways historically, both of which are meaningful.

- Progressive View (Ladder): Each virtue builds on the previous, not in a legalistic sense, but in a kind of sensible, transformational sequence. This mirrors ancient models of spiritual ascent (e.g., John Climacus’ *Ladder of Divine Ascent*¹³).
- Integrative View (Virtue Web): The graces are interdependent. Growth in one strengthens the whole. “Add to...” does not necessarily imply sequential development, but the intentional cultivation of all graces as a unified whole. The list functions like a composite portrait of spiritual maturity. Each quality interacts with and reinforces the others. For example:
 - Faith without love fails to engage others on a deep level.
 - Knowledge without self-control is unpredictable, even dangerous.
 - Godliness without mutual affection is spiritual elitism.
 - Perseverance without virtue becomes stubborn.

Like the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23, these Christian graces are not meant to be separated into silos or developed in isolation, but cultivated together as an integrated life rooted in the Spirit.

- Both perspectives are helpful:
 - Progression gives us a pathway and clarity.
 - Integration reminds us that true spiritual maturity is never one-dimensional.

¹³ See “The Ladder of Divine Ascent,” *Wikipedia*, last modified June 27, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ladder_of_Divine_Ascent.

View	Emphasis	Application
Progressive (Ladder)	Sequential growth and spiritual maturity	Focus on stages, helpful for discipleship or mentoring
Integrated (Virtue Web)	Wholeness, balance, mutual reinforcement	Focus on a full-orbed life of character shaped by grace

- In the end, this passage doesn't call us to analyze the structure as much as to *embody the substance* to cultivate a character that reflects the nature and promises of the God who has called us.

Series – Spiritual Growth, God's Gracious Initiative, Our Earnest Response

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- Lesson 7 – Carlus Gupton, August 3 – Our Earnest Response: The Grounding of Sound Theology, 2 Peter 1:12-21.