

“Make Your Calling and Election Sure”

The Second in a Series of Sermons on 2 Peter

Texts: 2 Peter 1:3-11; Deuteronomy 7:6-13a

There is a reason why Peter’s second epistle and the small book of Jude are not well-known, or widely read and preached upon in the churches. In both these letters, we find emphatic warnings about false teachers and the dangers of false doctrine they spread. For those who embrace the church-lite ethos of American Christianity, the message of 2 Peter and Jude will not be appreciated, nor warmly received. While many preachers and churches wish to emphasize the positive, 2 Peter and Jude remind us of the negative. There is truth, and there is error. If we believe the one (truth) we are going to encounter the other (error). When contemporaries tell us that doctrine does not matter, 2 Peter and Jude remind us that it does. If our contemporaries seek unity and avoid controversy to the point of fostering a willingness to make peace with false teaching, then 2 Peter and Jude both warn us of the great dangers of doing exactly that.

This is not to say unity is a bad thing—Christians are to seek unity around the truth of those doctrines passed down to us by Jesus and his apostles in the pages of Holy Scripture. Reformed Christians identify our own doctrinal standards as the “Three Forms of Unity” for a very important reason. We believe particular doctrines, and unite around them by confessing a common faith—a faith which we believe to be biblical and which is clearly and concisely summarized in our confessions. Unity is very important, so long as it grounded in the truth of those things taught in God’s word.

The Psalmist tells us “*behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!*” (Psalm 133:1). Jesus prays that his people would be one (John 17:11). Paul likewise speaks of Christians standing together because we are one body and indwelt by the same Holy Spirit. We have one common hope, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism (Eph 6:4-5). We may each be different parts, but we are all members of the body of Christ. This is precisely why false doctrine is so dangerous—it is as though one part of the body has cancer, or has become gangrenous. Such seriously illness in one part of the body must be dealt with immediately when it arises, and even perhaps removed, to maintain the health of the whole.

Sadly, we know too well those overzealous folk who apply the label “heretic” to anyone with whom they have the even slightest doctrinal disagreement. It is one thing to defend the truth from error. It is quite another when ill-informed, or just plain ornery people, to all-too easily declare others to be heretics, without serious consultation of the perceived heretic’s entire body of work, consideration of their character, and often without any regard to the disruption of the peace of the church, or the creation of schisms and factions which can result from such rash declarations. Defend the truth we must. Identify false teachers we must. Repudiate and refute their teaching we must. But there is a right way to do this. And there is a wrong way. Peter and Jude will lead us in the right way.

For good or for ill, as the case may be, Peter and Jude wrote before the advent of the self-professed internet theologian—typically a bright and witty (or even a caustic) person, who, having no formal theological training, who writes on doctrinal matters they may not fully understand but with the certainty of a papal decree. The good thing about such people is that they challenge and lampoon sacred cows and pomposity which cry out for such treatment. They often are often the first ones to smell the smoke of false doctrine, which, if not extinguished, can lead to a serious and destructive fire. But all too often, the

internet theologian engages in gossip, speaks authoritatively to matters about which they only know little, and often times in open violation of the ninth commandment, casting their opponent in the worst possible light. Internet theologians can be brave behind the anonymity of their computers and tablets, but rarely if ever do they thoroughly investigate, personally consult, or properly research those whom they engage from behind the safety of their IP address.

But if Peter and Jude teach us anything about responding to false teaching, they remind us that this task of defending the faith against false teachers is essentially a churchly activity. Rooting out false doctrine and refuting it is the responsibility of duly-ordained elders and ministers, who respond in the context of the local and regional churches, and who have appropriate policies and procedures in place to deal with false teaching when it inevitably arises. While self-appointed internet theologians anathematize each other on their blogs and block their heretical opponents on Facebook, churches must engage in the difficult and gut-wrenching task of church discipline—a slow and measured process in which one person’s suspicion about false teaching must be confirmed publically, by others who have done the proper study, gathered relevant evidence, and who have spoken to all the parties involved, before deciding anything. Yet, sadly, one reason why we have seen the rise of internet theologians is because their own churches often shirk their divinely-mandated task of defending their sheep from savage wolves. Many an “internet theologian” has taken up the cause of truth in opposition to false doctrine simply out of self-defense or because of a passion for truth.

As unpleasant as the task is to some, 2 Peter and Jude deal directly with false teaching and its consequences. These two letters warn against the false teachers and false doctrine of their day—some of whom do in fact resemble certain false teachers of our own day. Peter and Jude remind us of the damage such teachers do—leading souls astray and creating a climate for immoral behavior to flourish unchecked, even justified. Peter and Jude also remind us that we neglect the refutation of error in the churches to our own peril—their cancer will spread and kill the entire body. So, as we begin to work our way through these two brief but powerful letters let us see the task of refuting error as a weighty responsibility with eternal consequences, and as a matter to be conducted carefully and in love. The refutation of error is not as a hobby we engage in when we are bored, and we ought not speak on such matters with an authority we do not rightly have—as internet theologian disconnected from the pastors and elders of local churches.

In our introductory sermon (last time), we discussed the authorship and authenticity of 2 Peter, and came to the conclusion that despite the challenges raised against the authenticity of this epistle by critical scholars, there are good and compelling reasons to believe that 2 Peter was written by the Apostle Peter, while still in Rome, at some point before the death of the Roman emperor Nero in A.D. 68—who it is believed, had Peter put to death. Although we do not know to which church (or group of churches) the letter was sent, it is likely that this letter is a farewell address from Peter warning about false teaching, edited into the form of an epistle, and then sent as a circular letter to the churches in Asia Minor (the same region mentioned in Peter’s earlier letter known as 1 Peter—cf. 2 Pet. 3:1).

After a two verse greeting which opens the epistle (vv.1-2), the next section of 2 Peter (vv. 3-11) amounts to a short sermon,¹ followed by Peter’s “testament” (vv. 12-15). Peter’s “testament” serves as an introduction to the Apostle’s warning about false doctrine which is found in the body of the epistle

¹ Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos, “II. Letter Opening (1:3–15)”

(chapters 2-3).² We will concentrate on Peter's opening "sermon" in vv. 3-11, before taking up Peter's "testament" next week, when we will discuss how Peter's comments about the power of the prophetic word, which is found in the balance of the first chapter (vv.16-21), serve as the basis for the refutation of false doctrine then plaguing the churches.

Addressing this letter to "*those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ,*" and extending to them God's word of "shalom" (v. 2) Peter gets right to the point—reflecting that sense of urgency which characterizes this letter since Peter is aware that his own death is imminent (1:14). Peter wants his readers to grow in their knowledge of their God and Savior Jesus Christ, so in verse 3, he speaks of Jesus' "*divine power [which] has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.*" The Apostle is concerned with the salvation and blessings which God has given to us, especially those things which pertain to life and godliness. These things are important because they distinguish those granted a righteous status before God (v. 1) from those who have once known the truth, but who have now departed from it, and whose reprehensible conduct is described in chapters 2-3.

Although there is some debate about whether Peter's reference to "divine power" refers to the Father or to Jesus, in light of Peter's clear assertion that Jesus is God (v. 1) I think it the latter. It is through our knowledge of the person and work of Christ (in whom all believers have the same righteous status before God) we realize that divine power which grants to us faith and the desire to live a life of godliness. What God requires of us (godliness), he freely gives to us through the person of Jesus. It is Peter's desire that those receiving this letter grow in this knowledge so that we live in light of the glory and excellence to which we have been called. When Peter speaks of "life" he is referring to eternal life—something given us by the power of God—and from which springs the life of godliness.

It is important to consider the cause and effect relationship here. There is no sense in which we can properly say that if only we "plug into God's power" we can live the "excellent and godly life." Rather, God has granted us a right standing (as a gift), through his divine power which gives us eternal life, which is then characterized by godliness. We participate in God's glory and manifest his "excellence" or goodness, in contrast to the lives lived by the false teachers and those who are taken in by them.³ Peter's comments here remind one commentator of Paul's assertion in Romans 1:3-4 regarding Jesus Christ, "*who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.*" The divine power of which Peter speaks is most clearly seen in Jesus' resurrection from the dead through the Spirit of holiness.⁴ I think this is on the right track.

As for the "godliness" which is manifest in the lives of those granted the gift of a right-standing before God, the term Peter uses is a rare word, which literally means "good worship," i.e., piety, or the idea that those who have been called by God will live their lives in a way suitable to those who have come to

² Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter, 194.

³ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 1:3.

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, 2 Peter, Jude, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), imported from Logos Bible Software, on 1:3.

know Jesus Christ.⁵ As Peter mentioned in verse 2, when he gave an apostolic benediction to those reading/hearing this letter, God's grace is multiplied through our knowledge of the Savior. To grow in godliness (piety), Peter says, we strive to know more and more about the person and work of Jesus Christ. We cannot live in godliness apart from knowing what God has done for us in Christ in saving us from the guilt and power of our sin. Calvin reminds us that "Peter's purpose is to ascribe expressly to God alone the whole credit for our salvation, so that we know that we owe everything to him."⁶

In verse 4, Peter connects this knowledge of Christ to its outcome, "*by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.*" Knowledge of those things which God has given us through Jesus Christ (our right standing, godliness, glory and excellence) confirms that these precious and great promises have been bestowed upon us because God is gracious, and not because we are worthy of them, or have done anything to earn his favor. Knowledge of these things enables us to realize that we are partakers of the "divine nature"—a concept which is often misunderstood or distorted. The term "divine nature" has a long history in Greek thought, going back as far as Plato, who refers to it in his work, *Phaedras* (230A).⁷ Plato held that all humans participate in the divine nature, even if not aware of it. This is very similar to the "divine spark" motif used by American transcendentalists (Emerson and Thoreau)—who held that each of us possesses a "divine spark."

Peter uses the term *theias* (divine nature) to mean that believers will in some way participate in the divine nature (expressed in God's attributes), but not in the divine essence (deity). Participation in the divine nature is the consequence of regeneration, when we are renewed after the image our creator (glorification).⁸ The sense here is similar to that of Paul, as expressed in Colossians 3:10, where Paul declares that those made alive in Christ (regenerated) "*have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.*" The concept of "partaking of the divine nature" was taken up early on by the Eastern Church, and subsequently developed into the doctrine of *theiōsis*, which is the primary category for understanding the doctrine of salvation in Eastern Orthodoxy.⁹

The doctrine of *theiōsis* is as central to Orthodoxy as the doctrine of justification *sola fide* is to Reformation Protestants. Timothy Ware, (now bishop Kallistos Ware) asserts, "for Orthodoxy, our salvation and redemption mean our deification."¹⁰ By this the Orthodox do not mean that we become divine, or that participate in any sense in the divine essence. They do mean that the goal of God's work in redemption is that "the Word's redemption of humanity through the assumed body can be exactly

⁵ Moo, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos Bible Software, on 1:3.

0. Calvin, Hebrews and I and II Peter, 329-330.

⁷ Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos on 1:4.

⁸ Francis Turretin, Institutes of Elenctic Theology, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed., James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1992). 1.190

⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, vol. 2 *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 125.

¹⁰ Timothy Ware, The Orthodox Church: New edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 231.

epitomized as the 'deification of the race' Adam's nature has died away in Christ. What remains after its dross has been purged is a radiant new nature, deified humanity: a 'Christ-ed' humanity, which is now no longer has death as its natural end, but the very communion of God as its destiny and goal."¹¹ The emphasis in Orthodoxy falls upon the incarnation saving the human race, not upon Christ's death and resurrection rescuing particular sinners from the guilt and power of sin.

But *theiōsis* in the Eastern Orthodox sense is not what Peter means when he uses the word *theias*. What Peter is saying is that by virtue of regeneration "believers will share in the divine nature in that they will be morally perfected; they will share in the moral excellence that belongs to God."¹² Although this process begins upon regeneration, it will not be fully realized until our glorification. That such partaking is essentially eschatological (tied to the resurrection at the end) can be seen in Peter's previous epistle, where he spoke of himself as "*a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed*" (1 Pet. 1:5).

Peter says that those who partake of the divine nature, *hav[e] escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire*. This sounds like Peter is echoing the Hellenistic thought of his day which taught a dualism between spirit and matter. If Peter is merely echoing pagan Greek thought, his meaning would be that because we now partake (in some sense) of the divine nature, at death we are liberated from the flesh and all its corruption (because the flesh is material). But unlike the Greeks of his day, Peter does not argue that the world is corrupt *because* it is material. Rather, there is corruption in the world because of human sin—the consequence of Adam's fall, and not because there is some sort of deficiency with creation.¹³ Peter says that sinful desire is present in the world. Because we have been given eternal life by the power of God, when we die, and are raised from the dead in glorified bodies, only then are we fully partakers of the divine nature and only then do we fully escape the sinful desires of the flesh. Nevertheless, our partaking of the divine nature begins once we are raised to newness of life.

In verses 5-7, Peter links the godliness brought about in us by our present possession of eternal life, the gift of faith and a right-standing before God, directly to our conduct as Christians. He says, "*for this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.*" Those who have been given faith in Jesus Christ are to demonstrate that faith in Christ by striving to develop virtue—*aretē*, a classic term from Greek ethics which means something like "moral excellence." Such moral excellence, Peter has already said in verse 3, is that to which we have been called. Faith in Jesus Christ, whose divine power is manifest in us, creates within us a drive to live the kind of virtuous life for which the Greeks strived. As Calvin puts it, our "faith should not be bare or empty, but that [virtue] should be its inseparable companion."¹⁴ Those who have been called to faith in Jesus, ought to be characterized by virtuous lives.

¹¹ John Anthony McGuckin, The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 153-154.

¹² Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 1:4.

¹³ Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos on 1:4.

¹⁴ Calvin, Hebrews and I and II Peter, 331.

Striving for virtue leads to striving for knowledge (of God and of Christ), which in turn, leads to the development of self-control (which in Galatians 5:23, is identified as a fruit of the Spirit). As Peter will tell us in the next chapter, the false doctrine spread by false teachers undermines self-control, leading to lives characterized by the indulgence of the lusts of the flesh (2:10). Self-control leads to steadfastness (endurance) so that Christians do not give up, nor give in to their passions, as the false doctrine in the churches leads people to do. And steadfastness, in turn, leads to godliness (piety) for which, Peter has already declared, believers have been equipped by the divine power of Christ (v. 3).

Godliness is not the goal (the telos), but leads to the goal which is *brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.*” Believers in Jesus Christ have become a family, with equal standing before God. We are to love one another as members together of the body of Christ. In this Peter echoes Paul (cf. 1 Cor. 13), John (1 John 4:19-21), and Jesus who said in John 13:34–35, “*a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” Peter’s language here might have shocked those in the Greco-Roman world who understood the virtue of love for kin, but would have stumbled over Peter’s exhortation to love those not related by blood or marriage. Many ancient pagans mocked Christians because of their stress upon loving their fellow Christians as though they were family.¹⁵ Christians were even accused of incest because they called each other “brother” and “sister.”

But such love for all those who participate with us in the divine nature by virtue of regeneration, is the necessary and logical outcome of being among our spiritual brothers and sisters (formerly strangers) who have also been given the gift of salvation through the divine power of Christ. As Christ’s divine power is realized within us, we begin to reflect the image of our creator—who is love. In fact, one way God demonstrates his divine power is by creating a new family of people who otherwise would not be family, before the watching world. Pagans cannot understand this love, and in Peter’s day, many felt that Christians were actually undermining the norms of society—you should love your kin, not total strangers. The false teachers, on the other hand, work to destroy the unity of the body of Christ by dividing it with their false doctrine and that sinful conduct such doctrine produces. Satisfying the lusts of the flesh takes precedence over loving your brothers and sisters in Christ.

In verses 8-11 Peter speaks of how the virtues described in verse 5-7 are to be reflected in the Christian life, which, as he will tell us, is why we strive to confirm our calling and election (v.10). In verse 8, Peter exhorts us “*for if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Peter speaks of the qualities he has just mentioned—the virtues of verses 5-7—and says they must be present in the lives of Christians, and that such virtues ought to be increasing. To put it another way, because of Christ’s divine power working in us, there will be sustained growth in the Christian life. There is nothing here to indicate that at any point in this life we achieve the ideal or perfect level of these qualities (virtues), only that we must strive for these things throughout our lives as Christians. We do so, knowing that the goal will be reached only when we die, or when Jesus Christ returns, whichever comes first. Regeneration inaugurates and establishes the beginning of a life-long process of growth in these qualities. Striving for these things—because we have already been given eternal life, the gift of faith, an equal status before God—keeps us from being ineffectual or unfruitful in the Christian life.

The absence of these things should be a warning to those who began the Christian life with great zeal, but

¹⁵ Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos on 1:7.

who has now given up on the life of steady growth in godliness (cf. Gal. 3:1-6). In verse 9, Peter warns, “*whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.*” Christians who are indifferent to the progress required of us (and for which we have been equipped by the divine power of Christ) are “nearsighted.” Such folk are focused upon themselves, indifferent to the piety God works in us to the point that they are blind—not blind to the truth, but blind to the moral qualities Peter has just described. They live as though the most important thing no longer matters—that we were cleansed from our former sins. When Christians forget (or stop considering) what it cost Jesus Christ to redeem us from sin, we become ungrateful to God and indifferent to what he requires of us—Godliness (piety). God requires this of us, because we have been called from a life of sin and death to new life which is a godly life.

To all those who have blinded themselves to the benefits which Jesus Christ secured for us, and then become indifferent to our growth in both the knowledge of God in Christ, and the godliness he works in us, Peter now extends a very solemn warning in verse 10. “*Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.*” Peter grounds the production of such virtues is, in part, in reflection upon our election by God. Those who are chosen by God in Christ from before the foundation of the world, are regenerated by God’s power, called to faith in Christ, granted a right standing before God, are also called to a life of holiness.

The Bible nowhere tells us why we were chosen by God to be delivered from the wrath to come—except in the general sense that God has chosen some and not others to manifest his glory (Rom. 9). As we read of Israel in Deuteronomy 7:7 (part of our Old Testament lesson), God chose this people solely because “*the LORD set his love on you and chose you.*” The same is true of those to whom Peter is writing—Jew or Gentile. John adds that such election does not depend upon blood (race) nor human willing, but God (John 1:13). Paul tells us that God chooses specific individuals to be saved, based upon his mercy (Rom 9:18). Those who are of God’s elect, who have been chosen by God to believe in Jesus Christ, cannot continue on in a life of indifference to the will of God, and will strive to live in godliness and desire the virtues enumerated by Peter in verses 5-7.

Those who have become indifferent to the demands of the Christian life are hereby warned by Peter that the way in which we diligently confirm our calling and election is by striving to live in godliness and manifest the virtues Peter has just mentioned. Those who are diligent about this, hear Peter’s warning and then heed it. They will find their election confirmed through their practice of these virtues. Those who strive to confirm their election in this manner will not stumble and fall—probably in the sense that they will be confirmed in their faith by the evidence of its fruits, and are therefore less likely to be taken in by false teachers, their false doctrine, and then live the kind of lives described in chapter two of this epistle, characterized by defiling passions and the rejection of biblical authority.

At the same time, a bit of caution is in order. We must not base the assurance of salvation entirely upon the presence of good works in our lives; works which we are able to see and quantify. There are indeed times when these virtues are present in such a way that we can see them and draw comfort from them. But there are times when this will not be the case, and we find ourselves struggling with sin, and failing to produce virtues. Yet, whether or not we can see these virtues in our lives at any given moment does not change the fact that we have been chosen by God. And how do we know that we have been chosen by God? Do you believe in Jesus? If so, you have been chosen by God. And if Peter’s warning concerns you, then his words have had their desired effect. Only those chosen by God worry about making their calling and election sure. Only those chosen by God will feel the urgency of this apostolic exhortation.

If Peter's warning concerns you, then the solution is readily at hand. Heed Peter's warning! Confirm your election by renewing your devotion and dedication to living a life in which these virtues are manifest, knowing that it is not your ability to do so perfectly which brings confirmation, rather it is the very desire to do so which confirms your election in Christ.

This is why Peter tells us in verse 11, *“for in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”* Since God calls us to a life of godliness, he richly provides for us so that we can do so. Both the motivation to enter into this kingdom, as well as the basis for doing so (eternal life) have been freely given by God as a gift. At the same time, this kingdom can be entered only by those who confirm their calling and election by renewing their desire to live godly lives—something the false teachers and those deceived by them, cannot do, nor will do. Those in Christ, will take Peter's warning seriously, desire to live godly lives, knowing that because we have been chosen by God, God will richly provide the ability for us to do so.

Yet Peter does something quite unusual here, he speaks of the kingdom of Jesus Christ (the usual reference is to the kingdom of God). He also speaks of that kingdom as eternal (perhaps alluding to Daniel 7:27), focusing not so much upon the presence of the kingdom (a prominent theme throughout the New Testament), but upon its never-ending (eternal) character.¹⁶ This point will serve as an important point of reference later on in regard to this present heaven and earth, which, as Peter will tell us, will be destroyed by fire (3:12).¹⁷ Not so with Christ's kingdom. His kingdom will never end.

The application we are to draw from Peter's “mini-sermon” in verses 3-11 is simply this. *“Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.”* We confirm our calling and election by keeping the merits of Jesus Christ (his death for our sins, and in his resurrection from the dead), ever before our eyes so that we are not nearsighted, or blind to the forgiveness of our sins which Jesus has accomplished for us by his death on Calvary. We confirm our calling and election by renewing our desire to live godly lives and manifest those virtues Peter has described. And we confirm our calling and election, by realizing that God has richly provided for us the means of grace (his word and sacraments) through which the Holy Spirit manifests the same divine power in us through which he raised Jesus from the dead. And as Peter reminds us, *“if you practice these qualities you will never fall.”*

¹⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 309-310.

¹⁷ Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos on 1:11.