

Keep Participating in Jesus *The Second Letter of Peter*

Why Are Christians Bossy? Or, Why is Good Good? Why is Evil Evil? *2 Peter 1:1 – 11*

Introduction: Erica's Family

Why are Christians bossy? That's our topic for tonight. And by this I mean why is it that Christian faith presumes to tell people how to live, at least in some sense? And another way of saying that is to ask, 'Why is Good Good? Why is Evil Evil?' There are various answers to that, but ultimately it is related to who Christians think God is. Let me tell you a story of how I started to understand God. The summer after my freshman year, I went home for the summer. My friend Erica and I wanted to record a song that we had written. I wrote the poem; she added the music. Because her family was a very musical family, she had some basic recording equipment at her house. During one of the times that we were there, her parents ordered pizza and I sat down with the whole family. It was Erica's mom and dad and two sisters. Now they are a Chinese American family. One of the things I noticed was that her mom and dad held hands. I had never seen Asian parents who held hands! I had to stop myself from staring. Then the conversation was really fun. They made jokes about each other. They shared about their day, and their lives. They invited me to share about myself. They asked me more questions. It was the best family conversation I had ever seen. It fed my soul. And the whole time, out of the corner of my eye, I was just amazed that the mom and dad held hands. After dinner, when everyone did their own thing, the mom and dad went over to the couch, and talked, and they still held hands! My own parents' marriage had never looked like that, and they were arguing about getting a divorce. So I was inspired. I wanted to ask, 'Can you adopt me?' Don't we all want to be part of a family like that? Where love is directed at you, yes – of course we want to be loved. But also, where love is not directed just at you. You're not at the center. Instead the love overflows from a relationship that exists before you, which is larger than you, and sets the tone and context for you. So when you encounter that love, it's like a river flowing from a huge spring. It has a shape and direction that calls you to drink from it and go with its flow.

Relevance: Why is Good Good? Evil Evil?

Why are Christians bossy? Because we believe that we are called by the God who exists as a family, a community called Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to enter into their inner relations and be adjusted to a new family.

Text

We're going to look together at a short text, in the second letter of Peter. This letter is not often taught, but it has some real gems. Here is the introduction: ^{1:1} Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ:

I'm going to go through the first 11 verses. I'll break it down into three parts. First, in v.2 – 4, Peter unpacks for us why good is good and why evil is evil. His answer is: the divine nature. Second, in v.5 – 7, he explains why we must increase in love; knowing good cannot be static; it always requires growth in love. Third, in v.8 – 11, he says to remember what Jesus accomplished for us. In other words, our rational mind must also be involved. That is the grounds of our participation in goodness and love, and the grounds of our escape from evil.

What Makes Good Good? The Divine Nature: v.2 – 4

So what makes good good and evil evil? I want to first show you this picture. In this picture, my wife Ming and I are standing in Torrey Pines State Park which is where pine trees and desert flowers grow on cliffs high above the beach. On this cliff, you could see for miles: over green-blue ocean with the sound of waves crashing on the shore, miles out into the sky with the sun shining and the breeze blowing on our skin. And I felt a desire which I did not act on: the desire to throw myself off the cliff!! I wanted to enter into the beauty before my eyes, because my heart longed for it so much. Have you ever seen a sunset so beautiful that your heart ached? Or stood on a mountaintop over a view so amazing you just wanted to fall through the air into its beauty? Why is it that we long for beauty? And more than just long to possess it or to remember it forever, but at times we want to become one with it, to pass into its beauty and receive it into ourselves? Well, that is a glimpse of what Peter is talking about here.

Look at v.2 – 4. ² Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; ³ seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of

Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. ⁴ For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.

We have become partakers of the divine nature. SHOTS FIRED. This simple Jewish guy who used to fish on the Sea of Galilee is saying he knows something Plato didn't!! Objective Reality Spiritually!! The divine nature!! The scandal to the Greco-Roman world as well as our modern and postmodern ears is to hear simple people claim that we can know God's divine nature in and through Christ. Not only that, Peter says that those who believe in Jesus have become partakers of God's divine nature. There is a bridge between us and God. The universe is not separated into spirit and matter, or Plato's forms and the material world, or some such thing.

Peter even solves the Euthyphro Dilemma. The Euthyphro Dilemma is a question asked by Socrates: 'Is what is morally good commanded by God because it is morally good, or is it morally good because it is commanded by God?' It's a chicken and egg problem. Which comes first? If you say 'good' comes first, then there is something higher than God, and then God can't really be God. But if 'God' comes first, then what He calls good might be arbitrary. Can God tell you to do something evil and call it good? And some regard that as a logical puzzle. But Peter says what God commands flows out of who God is. If God is a Trinity, a community of persons relating in joyful love to one another, then we have a third option that is coherent. God is good because He is love. So when He tells us to do good, it is because we are meant to reflect His goodness and His love.

We desire to pass into the beauty of the divine nature. In just a few more verses, Peter will mention being on a mountain with Jesus when Jesus was transfigured by the power of the Spirit and heard the Father love on the Son, and love through the Son. The experience of seeing the divine permeate and saturate and soak through the human in Jesus was overwhelming. Jesus showed Peter that human nature could be cleansed by God's divine nature, and joined to it. He shared our broken human nature that we might share in his healed human nature. Jesus brought human nature up into the life of God, into the loving life of the Trinity. And because Jesus includes our human nature in his, he invites us to share in what he has done in himself. In the third century, Clement of Alexandria said that the love within God is now portable. It moves around.

Illus: There's a recent book called *The Shack* that tries to help us understand what the relationship between Jesus and his Father is like, as well as the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Father and the Son. There's a guy named Mack who is a husband and father of five children. He loses his youngest daughter in a tragic kidnapping and murder in a shack in an Oregon forest. Years later, though the great sadness is still there, one day he gets a letter from God asking him to meet him in that shack. So he goes. And God the Father appears at first like a large black woman. Surprising, but what do you expect? An old white man with a beard? Is that any more true? Jesus is a Middle Eastern man. And the Holy Spirit appears as an Asian woman with blurry edges. Part of the point is that God in His love suffers at the hands of the world like all the oppressed minorities. What Mack is struck by immediately is how the three of them relate to each other, talking and laughing. No one dominates the conversation. They affirm each other. They listen to each other as if they were old friends and yet as if each word was new, appreciating each other as if they were seeing each other truly for the first time. There is a joy within God, between the Father, Son, and Spirit and in the three relationships there. And the fact that God is fundamentally a Trinity and not a Singularity means that the Christian God is love, radically other-centered love, in Himself. That is unlike every other concept of God there is.

So what makes evil evil? Evil is resisting or moving away from this God. Evil is a corruption, says Peter in 1:4. British journalist G.K. Chesterton wrote, 'When a man goes to a brothel, he is searching for God.' He may not acknowledge it, but he is yearning for personal union with Beauty, Love, Joy. He is degrading himself and the prostitute by going about it in this way. But the fact remains that he longs for something much deeper than what he is actually buying. C.S. Lewis said, 'All our vices are virtues gone wrong.' Peter calls it a corruption. Evil is not original. Evil is an abuse of free will to take our nature and our desires in a direction that is against God and resists God, this God of love. It takes something good – the self, and love – and bends it out of shape so that self-love becomes central.

So the next time you feel like you can't connect with people who party hard, think about your own desire for belonging, for joy, to take in something beautiful. You can affirm that in others. The next time you feel like you can't connect with people who are just driven by money and prestige, think about your own desire for significance,

meaning, and the desire to make a mark on the world. You can affirm that in others. All our vices are virtues gone wrong. Evil is a corruption of the good.

The Virtuous Spiral of Participation: v.5 – 7

That leads to the second section. What must we do in response? To participate in Jesus' healing of that corruption, as Peter says in the second section, v.5 – 7: ⁵ Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, ⁶ and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, ⁷ and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. By that, I think Peter means the self-giving love of Jesus.

We have to participate in this beauty and goodness and love because we are not neutral. Faith in Jesus means participation in Jesus by the Spirit. What did Jesus do for us? Heal human nature in himself, so he can share it with us by his Spirit. So if we share in who he is, we are becoming more and more truly human, from God's standpoint. That leads to moral excellence, or character transformation. Interestingly enough, participation in goodness personally leads to knowing God and reality. Knowledge is something that comes up often in this section, which I'll touch on later. It's personal and relational knowing, knowing by participating, not a knowing by having distant facts. Like how Adam knew Eve, we are to know God. And so on until you add love. It's a Virtuous Spiral, the opposite of a vicious spiral. This is a Virtuous Spiral.

Illus: Here's an example of how that matters. A few years ago, a young man who named Michael who identified himself as Jewish had a rather surprising experience where he felt Jesus spoke to him. A couple of weeks after he decided Jesus is real, he met with me, since he knew that I'm a professional Christian campus ministry person. He asked me if he could ask me some questions. One of his questions was, 'Why does God want me to abstain from sex?' He had a girlfriend, and she actually broke up with him because he wanted to be abstinent. So this new relationship with Jesus was having an impact on him, and her response to the changes happening in him was to break up with him. My response was, 'Because God wants us to bear His image and be like Him. And on a spiritual level, God shares Himself with us and becomes one with us in a permanent union. So sex and marriage is a physical representation of that deeper and more beautiful union. God doesn't use people for His pleasure and then break up with them and move on. And if we are to be like Him, then every aspect of our lives is to be patterned after Him. That seems to have made sense to Him.

Illus: How many of you know who Stephen Colbert is? He's a comedian who got his start on the comedy news show *The Daily Show* as a fake news journalist. He hosted the spinoff *The Colbert Report* for years. Now, he replaced David Letterman on *The Late Show*. He is one of the most brilliant people out there, and he never fails to make me laugh. He's mastered the awkward question. He's also a proud, card-carrying Catholic. Many Catholics call him the most famous Catholic in America. He credits his mom with encouraging him in his faith. But when he was young, his dad and two brothers were killed in a plane crash, and he had to find Jesus himself, personally. One thing he did when he was young was try to make his mom laugh. It was a way of showing kindness and love to her, in the midst of their grieving. Now, decades later, he can say that his love for Jesus intertwined with his love of making others laugh. And he looks back with tears and yet joy that the most terrible thing that ever happened to him is something he has come to love, because God was with him in it.

That is the importance of taking small steps, personal steps, of following Jesus and loving others with the self-giving love of Jesus. You might think you can script your life out. But I suspect that if you follow Jesus, you'll be surprised, very surprised, at who you become. Not just where life takes you, in the sense of circumstances outside you. But who you become, in the sense of what is inside you. Because it's who you become that God cares about most. And He has given all of who He is, no holds barred, to you so you can become all of who you are meant to be with Him.

Don't Forget Your Purification: v.8 – 11

So what will be outcome of following this virtuous spiral? That's the third and final section in v.8 – 11: ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. [Said positively, you will be useful and fruitful! You will bear the kind of life that God is cultivating in the world.] ⁹ For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins. ¹⁰ Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling

and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; ¹¹ for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.

What God is doing here at Harvard and in every human being is trying to purify them in Jesus. That's why He calls them to Jesus. If you've ever wondered whether your life matters eternally, here's a great statement about that. If you've ever wanted to become part of something infinitely beautiful, this is how. What more beautiful thing is there than a loving God purifying human beings by drawing us into Himself???

Plus, you can know that you know your life is meaningful. There is a contrast between knowing Jesus and knowing his grasp on you versus forgetting your purification. Look at how Peter is contrasting knowing vs. forgetting here: ² in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord... ³ through the true knowledge of Him... ⁵ in your moral excellence, knowledge, ⁶ and in your knowledge... ⁸ in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins.' And that is contrasted to the command that we 'make certain.' Why does he say this? Because Jesus came to purify the sin out of us, and presumably that's why we have come to Jesus and why we're still with him. So why would we not keep 'increasing' in these qualities?

Illus: A few years ago, I donated one of my kidneys to my wife's brother Paul. Of course our kidneys filter out toxins from our bodies so we can pee them out. Kidneys purify us. But Paul had to keep taking the medication so that his body would receive my kidney. It wouldn't make much sense if he stopped taking the medications that helped him receive the purifying organ. In a similar way, Jesus came into human nature so he could perfect in himself human nature, and become a spiritual organ donor to us. He gives himself to us by his Spirit so he can purify us. But have to keep receiving his Spirit so our bodies can adjust to his presence in us. If we don't, it just wouldn't make sense.

Practical Application

- Do one thing for Jesus this week, not for your career
- Think about your character as your participation in God's love.