Supplementing Your Faith
2 Peter 1:5-9

I want you to imagine two people having a conversation at work. They're the same age, wearing the same kind of clothes, working the same kind of job. And when they talk, they're using the same kind of words to talk about the same subject. But as they talk - let's say it's about a meeting that starts at 9am - it becomes obvious that they are on different planets. And to one of them starting at 9 means everyone is in place, all documents ready, pen in hand at 3 minutes to 9. Whereas to the other, starting at 9 means, arriving somewhere between 9 to 9:07, wandering over to the coffee machine, only to discover there's no milk and heading to the fridge. And the first says, 'hey this meeting was supposed to start at 9', and the other says, 'I know'. And one is German and the other is French and I'll leave you to work out who's who.

But they could be the same nationality, or not, and discussing what a wedding looks like, or what you eat at Christmas, or what's polite or not to talk about over dinner. And they might be talking about the same subject, using the same words, but how they think is worlds apart. Why?

Culture. Like a fish swimming in water who doesn't even know there is such a thing as water, we're being shaped and formed by culture, and we don't even realise it. We think the way we think, or see something is right, and we're not even thinking.

So look at v8 from today's reading, 'For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you *from being ineffective or unfruitful*.'

But what does such a life look like? Because I bet if I were to ask you, 'do you want to live an effective, fruitful life?', you'd say 'absolutely' and none of us would say 'nah, I'll go for the ineffective and unfruitful option.' But what are you saying 'absolutely' to? When you think in terms of a life that's effective and fruitful, what are you thinking of, and what's shaped that? More importantly, what does Peter think?

Fruitful and Effective
Now you only have to look at books published to realise that we are a ready market of people wanting to be effective. The 7 habits of highly effective people, or families. How to be the effective executive. Or, the way to get things done. And there are books that help us navigate the shift from one phase of life to the next and go from strength to strength.

And the Bible taps into this idea to describe the kind of life we should aspire to. Think of Psalm 1, as it describes the person who 'is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers' (v3). That in all seasons of life, there is a fruitfulness and effectiveness that's possible.

Or think of Jesus' parable of the sower, and how the ground the seed falls on determines its fruitfulness. And how there are things in life that hinder, even strangle fruitfulness, like, 'the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things' (Mk 4:19).

So we want to be effective, and the Bible says we can be. But are we talking about the same thing? Or is how you view effectiveness and fruitfulness shaped by a different culture from the Bible? Like colleagues starting a meeting at 9, are we living in different worlds?

Well, look again at what Peter writes, v8, 'they keep you from being *ineffective or unfruitful*'. And the word for ineffective is the word for idleness, for being slothful. It's one of the seven deadly sins.

And when we think of someone who is idle or slothful, we think of a couch potato, sat with a beer in one hand and the TV remote in the other. Nothing effective or fruitful about him. But what about the workaholic, the man or woman who seems incredibly effective and fruitful as judged by our culture, with a research output, or grants obtained, or grades achieved, or sales made to make them feel good and everyone else jealous. And yet, when it comes to the things that the Bible says really matters, they may be as ineffective and unfruitful as the guy with the remote. Why? Because they're avoiding the hard work of love. Like love for parents and friends, kids and spouse and work means they don't have to face those demands. And, ultimately, they're lazy about love for God.

You see, as we'll see, the effectiveness and fruitfulness Peter's talking about has love as it's goal. Because he's talking about your character.

Add to Faith

Look at v5, 'For this very reason, make every effort to supplement *your faith* with virtue.' Now, if you want a building to stand, it needs a foundation. If you want a tree to flourish it needs roots going down into soil. What is that foundation, what's the root and the soil for an effective fruitful life? Well, Peter says, it's faith. It's what everything else grows in and stands on. And so if at the end of our life we want others to look back and say, 'look at the fruit', we need to be people of faith. But not the way the world thinks of that, like it's ok for you to believe whatever provided you're sincere. But personal, real, living trust in Christ.

And we are 'to supplement' that faith with virtue. What do you think of when you hear *supplement*? It sounds like adding vitamins to your diet, doesn't it. You visit your mother and she says, 'you're looking so pale and pasty. You need to take supplements: 3 spoonfuls of fish oil 3 times a day will sort you out!'

Or, maybe you visit a friend's house and they're growing tomatoes, and they give you some, and they are small and sweet and delicious. And you ask them, what are you feeding them?

Well, Peter's meaning something even more. The word he uses for *supplement* was a technical word for providing for something at your own expense. And it comes from the person who paid to stage Greek plays. There was the playwright, and the director, but someone had to fund it all. Someone had to open their pockets and be generous. They had to supplement the script and the stage.

And Peter's saying, if you want to be effective and fruitful, you need to do that to your faith: you need to invest yourself, spend yourself, add to, and supplement your faith with… what?

What would you expect him to say? That depends on what you think it means to be effective or ineffective, fruitful or unfruitful doesn't it. So how can you know?

Well, let's say you have a knife, but it is not doing what you want it to do. So you take it to the ironmongers and say, 'this knife is totally ineffective, it's useless, can you sort it please.' Do they go, 'oh, you want it polished, we can buff it up and make it shine for you so that everyone who comes in your house sees it and goes, 'wow, your knife!' Or 'what you want is a new design engraved in the handle so everyone knows 'wow that must have cost a lot.' No, they'll go: 'it's blunt? No problem, we can sharpen it.' Why? Because an effective knife is a knife that cuts. Because that's what it's designed to do.

Or imagine you've got an apple tree. And this year it produces a bumper crop. Fruit is literally hanging off it. But when you take a closer look you realise, 'those aren't apples, those are Brussel sprouts and aubergines.' Is that tree being fruitful? Yes… and no. Why? Because it's the wrong fruit. It's not bearing fruit according to its nature.

So what are you designed to do? What fruit are you supposed to bear according to your nature? Well, Genesis 1 tells us, 'God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."… So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them' (Gen 1:26-27). You've been designed to image God in creation. Your nature is to display his nature. You're to represent him to the world.

Which is why when Peter tells us what it is we're supplement our faith with, if we want to live effective, fruitful lives, it's a list of seven character traits. Beginning, v5, with 'virtue'.

And classically, virtue consists of wisdom, temperance, courage and justice - the four cardinal virtues. And probably that's how Peter's first readers would have understood it. So when I was explaining that to my girls last week, one of them said: 'Great. 7 character traits and the first one already has 4 subtraits. Your sermons going to have 28 subpoints, isn't it'. No! You see, Peter's pointing them even higher. Because the word for virtue is the same word he uses in v3 for the 'excellence' of Christ.

So, add to your faith excellence. Moral excellence. Excellence of character. And how do you know what that looks like? By looking at the excellence of Jesus.

Now, as others have argued, we live in a *post*-virtue culture. And if people think of virtue at all they think negatively, like 'she's so *virtuous*' as if that were a bad thing. Instead, we talk about values, not virtues. And my values are mine to determine, and you can't critique them.

But Peter's saying, 'if you want to be all you were made and designed to be, if you want to be fruitful and effective, get serious about virtue. And there is a standard against which that can be judged. So take real, active steps to see your character become more like Christ's.'

Then, v5, supplement 'virtue with knowledge.' So, if for Peter knowing Christ intimately and relationally, and trusting him, is the ground out of which everything else grows, we need to be continually adding to that knowledge - the kind of knowledge that says, this is what God is like, this is why I can trust him, and this is what it means to live the Christian life.

Then, v6, supplement 'knowledge with self-control.' And for Greek philosophers, self-restraint was a prize worth seeking. For the Stoics, the free man was the man who was his own master, whose desires for food and women were under control. Nothing had control of him but himself. And we might think, 'man, our culture's the exact opposite: zero self-control.' Except, we're also told that to be truly free you have to be your own master and not let anyone else take that place.

And so Peter's critiquing their culture and ours. Because for him, self-control is not self-mastery in your own self-strength *or* self-mastery through self-absorption. It's surrender to God and his will and his ways, under the power of his Spirit. And if you want to grow in your effectiveness and fruitfulness, you need to be growing in that kind of Spirit-empowered self-discipline, Peter says, where desires for good things or bad things are not controlling you.

And the question is why? Why do the New Testament writers repeatedly raise the issue of self-control? Well, one reason CS Lewis gives in his book *Miracles* is that the great hope of the Christian life is the resurrection of the dead: that one day we will be given glorious, supernatural, resurrection bodies. And as Lewis say, if we cannot control this body how will we control a heavenly one? That this life is a training ground. Like a school boy given a pony so that one day he might ride a war horse galloping beside his king.

Then, v6, supplement 'self-control with steadfastness.' And steadfastness was also highly prized in their culture. It's what soldiers did in battle: they held the line, they didn't flee the field, they stayed in the fight. And Peter's saying, cultivate endurance; keep holding up and holding on, and it'll keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful. Not because you face a physical battle, but because you're in a spiritual one.

Because if self-control is about pleasure, and not being mastered by it, steadfastness is about sorrows and not being mastered by them. It's not crumbling when life isn't going the way you want. It's keeping in the race, getting up in the morning, picking up your Bible, choosing to love and forgive, keeping up the habit when habit is all you have and everything is screaming 'I can't do it!' And Peter's saying, you can, the finish line is in sight.

Verse 6, supplement 'steadfastness with godliness.' And again, that's a word Peter's readers knew well. It's the word for piety - for the reverence you gave God and the respect you gave to those in authority over you: like your parents, and civic rulers, and the law. And as we'll see, if some of the false teachers Peter confronts later abandoned self-control, they also disrespected authority. And in our own culture of expressive individualism, disrespect for authorities is growing and institutions and crumbling, and Peter says, true knowledge of God leads to reverence for him and respect for others.

Verse 7, supplement 'godliness with brotherly affection.' And that was totally uncontroversial to his first readers. To look out for your own, your family, was the bedrock of society. Except, these early Christians didn't just look after their own. And there's been a slew of historians who have pointed out that one of *the* major reasons why Christianity conquered the empire was that they cared for the poor and the homeless, the slave and the sick, the women and the abandoned infants, and they cared for them as family.

And Peter's saying, 'you want to be effective and fruitful in life? Add that kind of kindness to your life.' And in an age when internet algorithms are pushing us further and further into polar extremes, brotherly affection across boundaries of race and politics and income, has lost none of its power to turn the world on its head.

And so, if faith in Christ is the grounds out of which everything else grows, love is the crowning virtue, Peter says. Verse 7, supplement 'brotherly affection with love.' And it may be last on the list, but it's not the least is it? In his first letter Peter wrote, '*above all*, keep loving one another earnestly…' (1 Peter 4:8). And Paul, having spoken of the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love, wrote, 'but the greatest of these is love' (1 Cor 13:13).

Now today we're told that love is love, it's whatever someone says it is. And Peter and Paul would say, 'No. Love is not a feeling. Love is a virtue.' And in his great passage on love in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul doesn't talk about what love *feels* but what it *does*. That love is not about your life looking

and feeling like a Barbie movie, all pink and fluffy, but about a life of sacrificial service to others. A love that flows out of how God has loved us.

Because it's God's love for you, Peter says, that tells you *why* and *how* you can and should be growing in Christ like character.

Remember don't Forget
Look at v5: '*For this very reason*, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue.'

Now for Peter's first readers, living in a Greco-Roman culture, lists of virtues like Peter's would have been common. Live a virtuous life and the gods will bless you. Things haven't changed, have they? The American sociologist, Christian Smith, conducted extensive research on the views of modern young adults and defined their prevailing view of religion as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism: If I live a good life, God will bless me.

Peter turns that on its head. You see, when he says, 'For this very reason…', what reason is he referring to? To all that he's already said in v1-4. That you've obtained a faith of equal standing to Peter's, and share all the honours and privileges of heaven that he had. And not because of your righteousness but Christ's - verse 1. That Christ's divine power has already given you everything you need to live a godly life, and he's called you and saved you and shown you the glories and excellencies of Christ - verse 3. That he has granted to you his very great and precious promises so that you can partake in the divine nature and have a new heart and his Holy Spirit living within you, and he has already rescued you from the corruption of the world - verse 4.

Because all this is already true for you, Peter says, add to your faith virtue.

So it's not, if I want God to love me and bless me I need to live a virtuous life - that's religion. It's, because God has already loved me and blessed me in Christ, that I want to live a life of virtue - that's Christianity.

That's the *why* we should do it: because of what He's already done. But *how* can we do it?

Verse 5, 'For this very reason, *make every effort* to supplement your faith with virtue.' Now, there are two wrong approaches to growing in our characters. One is to say, 'let go and let God.' 'Talk of making every effort, that's legalistic, I'm going to let God change me as and when he wants.' The other, is to treat the Christian life as one bootcamp after the other, and you've always got to be doing, or someone else is always telling you what you should be doing, and it's exhausting.

Instead, Peter's saying, 'let the grace of God, what he has *already* done for you in Christ, how he loves you and accepts you, work its way deep into your heart - 'For this reason' - and then do all that you can to grow like him.

You see, many of us would say, 'yeh I want to be effective and fruitful, I want to grow in virtue and Christlike character' and we make *some* effort, for *some* time. And there's a spurt of activity. But Peter's saying, make *every* effort. Rather than settle for a chronic spiritual inertia be intentional about growth.

How can you do that?

Well, some of you have heard David Niblack, director of the Bible College in Geneva say that the ultra-marathons he runs aren't running contests, they're feeding contests. It's the person who manages their calorie intake right who crosses the line. And so if Peter says we're to supplement our faith with steadfastness, with endurance, then the Christian life is also a feeding contest.

So, think about making every effort to get out of bed half an hour earlier everyday and find a quiet spot and start reading and meditating on God's word. And if you're not doing that already, start with a gospel, and allow God to put the glory and excellency of Jesus before you.

Or consider the other books you read. CS Lewis said 'It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between.' One written by one of the great saints, from outside our culture, who have gone before us. Why? Because it can shake us out of our culturally induced sleep. As Lewis said, it keeps 'the clear sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds.' So think about picking up a classic by Augustine or Edwards, or even Lewis and grow in what Peter calls, v8 'the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.' The knowledge that doesn't just agree with you, but challenges you.

Then, listen to your critics. Maybe a friend or a family member criticises your behaviour, attitude or character. Don't dismiss it, or excuse yourself; examine yourself. Ask yourself, is there a kernel of truth in their criticism? And if so, address that area.

Or maybe the Spirit brings a wrong attitude to your attention, or your conscience begins to prick you, or you find yourself falling into some recurrent sin and it begins to bother you, don't squash it, consider it. Take the time to work it through: what is this? What are the triggers for my behaviour? Why do I desire this too much? What's behind this attitude?

But above all, look at v9, 'For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, *having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.'*

So if you want to be effective and fruitful in your life, we need to make every effort to add knowledge of Christ to our faith, Peter says. The danger is we do the opposite and forget. Like a shortsighted person who can't see what's in front of them, we forget the gospel. First we take it for granted and think we need to move on to more meaty things, and before long we're forgetting that Christ died for our sins to wash us clean, and before long we've reduced Christianity to 'you've got to do, do, do if you want God to love you.' And guilt rather than grace begins to define you, and you give up.

But make every effort to remember the gospel; and remind yourself, 'Christ died for me and has washed me clean', and speak to yourself more, as Martyn Lloyd Jones would say, and listen to yourself less, and it'll change how you see effectiveness and fruitfulness. And it'll change what you want to add to your life. And you'll want to grow in virtue. And as you do, your character will grow more like his and that's what'll make you effective and fruitful in the knowledge of him.