

Checklist for a Better Life • 2 Peter 1:5-9

After World War II the words “Made in Japan” became pretty much synonymous with junk. But in the decades since then a revolution has taken place and “Made in Japan” has become synonymous with the highest quality in cars, cameras and electronics. What changed?

Kaizen is a Japanese word associated with the manufacturing approach called Total Quality Control. Kaizen calls for constant improvement: every day do a little better; every day make one tiny improvement; every day increase the quality. Over years and decades the results can be revolutionary.

What if we “kaizen-ed” our Christianity? Bit by bit, day by day—a slow but sure “Total Quality Control” of our Christian lives. Over years and decades the results can be revolutionary.

Let’s take a look at the Christian “kaizen” in II Peter 1:5-9:

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, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

In the first century Roman world books were expensive and rare, so people became very good at memorization. They memorized everything from shopping lists to street directions because they often had no other way to retain information. Moral lists became common and Peter’s readers knew as soon as they heard these words that they were expected to memorize and assimilate the eight items on this supernatural checklist for a better life.

What was good for them is good for us. Learning this list and working on it every day will move

us to the next levels of our Christian life and faith. However, we must remember that the original list was written in Greek. Sometimes a Greek word easily translates into English and sometimes it is more difficult.

The lead-in to these words tells us that we live in an evil world but that God has given us everything we need for life and godliness. God has given us all we need but it is up to us to take advantage of what God has given. The idea here might be compared to an orthopedic surgeon who replaces a hip or a knee and after the surgery prescribes physical therapy exercises so that you can take full advantage of what you have been given. Peter gives us a list of what to do, so let’s learn that checklist for a better life!

First on the list is faith. The Bible tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God. In fact, without faith it is impossible to be a Christian. That would be like doing all the physical therapy but never having the surgery for hip or knee replacement. Without the surgery the exercises would not work. Without faith the rest does not much matter.

With faith we have our sins forgiven, our lives changed and eternity promised in the presence of God in heaven.

Peter goes on to point number two, “. . . *make every effort to add to your faith goodness.*” Faith is

the bedrock of this relationship with God and our eternal destiny, but the New Testament says, “*Faith without works is dead.*” So we need to live out our faith with goodness.

The Greek word the apostle Peter used is rare in the New Testament. It is sometimes translated “courage” or “excellence”. It refers to doing well what you are meant to do. Fertile soil is meant to produce plentiful crops. A knife is meant to cut. A racehorse is meant to run. Whatever you are meant to do, do it with courage and excellence for God. I was not meant to be a musician, movie star or professional athlete. I was meant to be a pastor. So, according to II Peter 1:5, I need to make every effort to be good at what I was meant to do.

Whatever you are meant to do, do it with courage and excellence for God.

There is enormous freedom in this truth. I don't need to be good at what you are meant to do. And you don't need to be good at what I am meant to do. I can be me. You can be you. We live out our Christian faith making every effort to be excellent at what God has called and gifted us to be and do.

Number three on Peter's list is knowledge. However, he is not talking here about factual knowledge so much as moral knowledge. He is saying that if we have faith and excellence in what we are meant to do in life, we also need to know what is right.

What could be worse in life than being really good at something, but unable to know the difference between right and wrong? Someone can be excellent at making money but not know the right way to use the money. Someone can be really good at writing but not know the right things to write.

Charles Steinmetz was a brilliant electrical engineer who designed and built the large electrical generators for Henry Ford's first factory in Dearborn, Michigan. These generators made the automobile production line possible and profitable. As a result, Ford Motor Company became highly successful and Henry Ford became a very rich man.

One day the entire plant shut down and went dark and the production line stopped. All the mechanics were unable to fix the problem, so Henry Ford called Charles Steinmetz and brought him in. Steinmetz tinkered with motors, buttons, wires and switches until the power returned and the plant was fully operative.

Shortly after that Steinmetz sent an invoice to Henry Ford for \$10,000 for his services. (This was a hundred years ago when \$10,000 was an astonishing amount of money!) Ford refused to pay saying that this was too much money for a few hours of tinkering around. So, Steinmetz submitted a revised invoice: "For tinkering around on the motors, \$10; for knowing where to tinker, \$9,990. Total: \$10,000." Henry Ford paid the \$10,000.

As Christians we need to go beyond being good at what we do. We need to know what is right. Every day we must make every effort to add knowledge of what is right to our goodness and faith.

Number four is self-control. This is a specific virtue that is very important for successful Christian living. It is about controlling our passions. Passion is good. I love passionate people. These

are people who care deeply and are enthusiastic; they have intense feelings. They may be passionate about sex, politics, health, their jobs, their neighborhood, their country or other people. Being passionate is great—as long as it is under control. But when passions get out of control they become obnoxious, destructive, selfish and counter-productive. We all know and try to avoid people with uncontrolled passions.

Blessed are those Christians who keep their passions focused. Whether pleasure, anger, sorrow or personal opinion, these are people who have the self-discipline to subject their passions to God, the Bible, reason and the healthy influence of others.

Researchers conducted experiments with four-year-old children to test their self-control. Two pieces of candy were placed in front of each child. They were told not to eat the candy until the teacher returned in ten minutes. If they abstained from eating the candy for those ten minutes they would be given five pieces of candy.

The researchers left the room and observed the children through one-way glass. For some children it was agony. These four-year-olds looked at the candy, felt the candy, got their tongues as close as they could to the candy and looked like they were being tortured for 600 seconds. Could they control their candy passion for the short term in order to gain more in the long term? Some could not wait and ate the two pieces of candy even though it meant less later.

In the Columbia University experiment these children were followed up over thirty years. Those with self-control did much better in life. Their SAT scores were higher. As teenagers the boys had fewer run-ins with the law and the girls were less likely to become pregnant.

The point here is not to lack passion; the point is to control passion. As Christians we need to work on keeping passion focused for God and for good with self-control.

Number five is perseverance. Perseverance specifically refers to the tough times in life and hanging in there in anticipation of a better future. Some people do not deal well with difficulty. They whine and complain or become angry. If life is not the way they want it to be they blame other people and become angry with God. It is a lousy way to

live because every life has difficulty. The test of our faith and character rarely comes in good times. Bad times show what we are made of and whether or not we truly trust God. The great example of perseverance is described in Hebrews 12:2-3:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

When President George W. Bush named Condoleezza Rice National Security Advisor it was said that she had become the most powerful woman in the world. She is a Christian and an African-American, both of which are important to understanding what she said about perseverance at the February 6, 2003, National Prayer breakfast in Washington, DC:

“American slaves used to sing, ‘Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen—Glory, Hallelujah!’ Growing up, I would often wonder at the seeming contradiction contained in this line. But as I grew older, I came to learn that there is no contradiction at all.

“I believe this same message is found in the Bible in Romans 5, where we are told to ‘rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.’ ”

Condoleezza Rice made “every effort to add to her faith, goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance,” hanging in there, enduring, with anticipation of a better future.

Sixth on Peter’s list is godliness. The Greek word is “eusebeia”. This is difficult to translate although it is often translated as “religious”. It is a rare word in the New Testament. Probably the rea-

son it is so rarely used in the New Testament is that “eusebeia” was used to describe pagan religions and Christians wanted to distance themselves as much as possible from pagan religions.

I, for one, am pleased that “eusebeia” or “religious” is pretty much left out of the New Testament because I have never liked the word. To me, “religion” smacks of organizations, institutions, rules and loads of self-righteousness. I have never wanted to be religious. I just want to be Christian.

However, there is a sense in which “religious” is a good word. It is the practical living out of faith. It is living with a constant awareness of God. Living “religiously” is the opposite of living “secularly”. “Secular” does not deny God, it just does not think about God.

Let me tell you one of the greatest insults you can give a person. She bluntly asks you, “What do you think of me?” And you answer, “I don’t think of you.” (You don’t think good of her; you don’t think ill of her. You just never bother to think about her at all. She just does not matter to you.) That is what a secular person thinks of God. Not at all! He does not think ill of God. He does not think good of God. God just is not part of his thinking.

The opposite is true of the religious person. The godly person thinks about God all the time. God is part of everything. God is important when waking up in the morning and going

to sleep at night, when worshiping and when working, when praying and when playing. This is the godly “religious” Christian.

Number seven on Peter’s list is kindness—simply being nice to people. For generations Minnesotans have prided themselves on being nice: Minnesota Nice! However, some newspaper articles in the Minneapolis and St. Paul newspapers have said we are not as nice as we say we are. In fact, we are rude, inconsiderate, selfish and often mean.

A survey reported in *U.S. News and World Report* claimed that 89% of Americans say unkindness is a serious problem in America. Seventy-three percent of Americans say that mean-spirited po-

The godly person thinks about God all the time. God is part of everything.

litical campaigns are to blame, 67% think rock music is to blame and 52% blame talk radio. But only 1% thinks their own behavior is unkind. 1%! So, it's everybody else's fault.

The test of kindness is not when other people are nice to us. The test of kindness is when others are unkind to us or do something we do not like. It's being kind to others even when they are unpleasant to us. Sometimes it is frightening how unkind people can be—saying, writing and doing things that are downright mean. But those who want to be like Jesus, those who want to rise to the next level of Christianity, are those who work hard at being kind to others even in the worst of situations.

The bottom line of the list is the sum-total of the entire list: love. The Greek word is *agape*, and it is a quintessentially Christian truth, concept and virtue. This is not love as we most often use the word—as emotional and romantic. It is more about what we do than how we feel. It is behavior or action that is always in the best interest of the other person. It is always doing what is best for others whether we feel like it or not. Here is the way Paul described it in I Corinthians 13:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails . . .

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

How important is this list for those of us who want to grow and move higher in our Christian lives? Peter has some very pointed words to say in II Peter 1:8-9:

For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is near-sighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
©Leith Anderson