

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 12, 2014**

TEN QUESTIONS

2 Peter 1:1-11

Are you familiar with the 20 Questions game? I guess there are different ways to play it. We used to play it on family road-trips when our kids were younger. The way we played it was to have one member of the family think of a person, place, or thing that the rest of us would try to figure out by taking turns asking yes or no questions. The goal for the person answering the questions was to stump the rest of the family for the whole 20 questions. The goal for everyone else was to be the first one to figure out the mystery person, place, or thing. Occasionally, it could be a good way to pass the time on a trip.

You will be happy to know, I think, that the title of today's message is "Ten Questions," not 20. I think you will also be happy to know that we are not going to play a condensed version of the 20 Questions game this morning. Instead, it is simply a follow-up to last Sunday's message in which we looked back on the year just ended and also looked ahead, and I asked you to consider making a resolution to be better off spiritually when 2014 draws to a close than you are today.

LAST SUNDAY

Looking back at the past, I told you about Samuel in the Old Testament setting up a stone memorial for the people of Israel to remind them of the help they had received from God, who rescued and delivered them from the army of the Philistines. Samuel called the memorial "Ebenezer," which means "stone of help." When he dedicated the memorial, Samuel said to the people: "Thus far has the Lord helped us" (1 Samuel 7:12). That is really our testimony, too, because it is true: *Thus far* has the Lord helped us. *Thus far* has *the Lord* helped us. *Thus far* has *the Lord* helped us. If the Lord had not helped us thus far, we wouldn't be here today. But He *has* helped us thus far. By His grace He has brought us through another year. By His grace He has brought us safe thus far, and by His grace He will lead us all the way home.

Looking into the future, I asked you to think about what kind of role you want Jesus to play in your life in the coming year. Do you want Him to have a bigger role, the leading role, the starring role, in the story of your life as it unfolds in 2014? Or do you want Him to have just a small part, a bit part, or even just to make a cameo appearance, in the event you need to be rescued from a situation you can't handle yourself? When we reach the end of 2014 and look back on it, what kind of role do you want Jesus to have played in your life?

Thinking back to the verses we looked at in Hebrews 12 last Sunday, what kind of influence do you want these verses to have in your life this year? Is it the desire of your heart to set aside anything and everything – whatever it is – that gets in the way of your spiritual growth or distracts you from pursuing God's purposes for your life? Is it your desire to stop engaging in any and every sin that seems to trip you up so easily? Is it your desire in 2014 to run the

race of this life with a faith and a joy that just won't quit, keeping your eyes and your heart fixed on Jesus all the way?

I think it can be quite an adventure, and a ginormous blessing, if we covenant together to come alongside one another to encourage, support, and pray for one another in running our race and seeking to grow spiritually in the next 11 months, 19 days, and approximately 12 or 13 hours that remain in 2014. How best to do that is something to think about. Something to talk with God about. And maybe something to talk about with one another.

(In case you're wondering, none of the questions I've posed so far today count as part of the "Ten Questions" in the title of today's message. We're not quite there yet.)

MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO GROW SPIRITUALLY

Before I lay those questions on you, there is something we need to be sure to see and understand. I think it comes under the category of "intuitively obvious to the most casual observer," but I'm going to go ahead and say it anyway. Here it is: Jesus wants us to grow spiritually. He wants us to grow up spiritually. He wants you to grow up spiritually. He wants you and me, all of us, to make progress and to keep on making progress toward spiritual maturity. That is quite elementary, wouldn't you say?

The thing that a lot of people – a lot of *Christians* – don't get is that spiritual growth is not a do-it-yourself, self-improvement program. Too many Christians have this idea that salvation is all by grace (which it is) and that living as a Christian and growing spiritually is all by works (which it is not). Growing spiritually does require effort on our part. It takes hard work, in fact. Peter understood this. Look at what he says in today's Scripture reading, in 2 Peter 1:5-7, where, beginning with faith as the starting point, Peter builds a kind of ladder of Christ-like qualities that includes goodness (or moral excellence), knowledge (of God, His Word, and His ways), self-control (who couldn't use more of it?), perseverance (the same word used in Hebrews 12:1 to describe the way we are to run the race God has ordained for us), godliness, brotherly kindness (it is the Greek word *philadelphia*, which describes a quality the "City of Brotherly Love" – Philadelphia – could use more of), and finally love – *agape* love, which is God's kind of love, the self-giving, self-sacrificing kind of love perfectly incarnated by Jesus, who freely and willingly offered up His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

How do we go about growing these qualities in our lives? How do we cultivate these different types of spiritual fruit? Do we just by sitting around doing nothing, expecting God to simply snap His fingers and instantly make us spiritually mature? God could do it if He wanted. But that's not how He usually operates.

Notice the beginning of verse 5. What does Peter say? "Make every effort ..." "Devote yourself with all diligence." Is this another "works" plan, where everything depends on our efforts to make ourselves more like Jesus? No, it is not. The reason it is not is because of what Peter says in verse 3, where he tells us that through "His divine power," God has already "given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him" in the

gospel of His Son Jesus Christ. “Everything we need” means *everything we need*. It covers every possible situation, crisis, problem, and temptation we will ever encounter. It does not say that God will give us everything we may want. But in His grace, through the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, He has already made available to us all the spiritual resources and provisions we will ever need.

We still need to act. We still need to take hold of these gifts. We still need to “make every effort” and pursue spiritual growth with all diligence. We still need to appropriate God’s gifts of grace. Were it not for God’s grace, were it not for His divine power and initiative, all the diligence and devotion and effort in the world on our part wouldn’t make a difference. It begins with grace. It begins with the gift of faith, by which we are enabled to embrace the grace and love of God for us. It is through faith in Christ, through a true and personal knowledge of Him, that we receive the power – power from God – to live a godly life. Hard as we may try, we can’t do it on our own.

Paul put it this way in Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” The power to live a life that pleases God, a life characterized by faith, virtue, personal knowledge of God, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and self-giving love, comes from the fact that Christ now lives in me. In the person of the Holy Spirit, He has come to take up residence in me. And in you. By His Spirit, Christ has come to make His home in the heart and life of every person who received Him and His saving grace by faith.

What does this mean for you and me? Among other things, it means, as Peter declares, that by His divine power, by *His* power at work in us, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, God has already given us everything we need – all the spiritual resources we need – to live for His purposes and glory.

Unfortunately, that is not the way we live most of the time, is it? A pastor I know (Tullian Tchvidian) says that at least twice in the last year or so, he was running late for a meeting or an appointment and wasn’t able to find his car keys. Of course, that has never happened to anyone here, has it? (Haha. Of course, it has.) Certain that either his wife or one of his kids had misplaced them, he frantically ran from room to room, assigning blame along the way. “Who was playing with my keys?” he bellowed. “I put them right here on the eounter and now they’re gone. They don’t just vanish into thin air! Who took them? Where are they? I’m late!” And right when he was about ready to put everyone in solitary confinement with only bread and water, he walked into his bedroom one last time to look – huffing and puffing, moaning and groaning for everyone to hear – put his hand in his pocket, and found his keys. They had been there the whole time.

In one way or another, we all do that: With mounting frustration, we frantically search for something we already have. In His grace, by His divine power, God has already given us all the spiritual resources we will ever need. They are ours in Christ, gifts of His grace. But they are of no value to us unless we embrace them. Unless we use them. Unless we make the effort to apply them to our everyday lives.

Grace, as one theologian put it, is opposed to merit, but it is not opposed to effort. Or, as another said: “Grace is contrasted with earning but not with effort.” Just as we are powerless to save ourselves, we are powerless to grow in godliness on our own. However, in response to God’s grace, as recipients of this grace, which comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it and never will, we are, in the words of Peter, to “make every effort” to grow in grace and godliness, using the diverse gifts and resources of the Holy Spirit which are given to us in Christ. God has provided everything necessary for our spiritual well-being and growth in Christ, but we still must act. If we are to grow up to spiritual maturity in Christ – if we are to be better off spiritually when 2014 comes to a close – we must devote ourselves to the means of grace God has provided in His Word, in the sacraments, and in the worship, fellowship, discipleship, and ministry of His church. We must make diligent use of spiritual disciplines such as prayer, reading the Scriptures, and solitude, among others, if we desire to deepen our relationship with God and to increase the effectiveness of our witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice what Peter says, beginning in verse 8: “If you possess these qualities (faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love) in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge” – your heart knowledge – “of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Not to develop and cultivate these qualities, he says, is to be short-sighted as to be blind to what is of real and lasting value in life (1:9). By making every effort to cultivate these qualities of a Christ-like life, however, by growing in grace and godliness, we become increasingly assured that we truly belong to God (1:10), and we look forward with hope and joy to the “rich welcome” that awaits us in “the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (1:11).

Do you want to be better off spiritually at the end of 2014 than you are today? Then “make every effort,” in humble reliance upon the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, to grow in faith, moral excellence, knowledge of God, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly (and sisterly) affection, and love.

FINALLY ... THE TEN QUESTIONS

But you may ask: What about the ten questions? Are we ever going to get to them? The answer is yes. Here they are. I’m not very technologically savvy (another truth that is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer), and I tend to do a lot of things the old-fashioned way. Sorry about that. It provides you with the opportunity to put into action the Scripture that says: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another” (Colossians 3:13).

I have printed copies of the ten questions, which will be passed out to you now. These ten questions come from Dr. Donald Whitney, a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. They have been posted in a number of places in the blogosphere.

These are ten questions for your personal reflection and prayer as you consider what God might want to do in you, and what God might want you to do, to be better off spiritually when this new year comes to an end.

1. What is the one thing you could do this year to increase your enjoyment of God?
2. What is the most humanly impossible thing you will ask God to do this year?
3. What is the single most important thing you could do to improve the quality of your family life this year?
4. In which spiritual discipline do you most want to make progress this year, and what will you do about it?
5. What is the single biggest time-waster in your life, and what will you do about it this year?
6. What is the most helpful new way you could strengthen your church?
7. For whose salvation will you pray most fervently this year?
8. What is the most important way you will, by God's grace, try to make this year different from last year?
9. What is one thing you could do to improve your prayer life this year?
10. What single thing that you plan to do this year will matter most in ten years? In eternity?

Ten questions. Don't let them overwhelm you. Pick one question and focus on it. You may be able to focus on more than one. But don't worry about trying to address them all at the same time.

Do you want to be better off spiritually at the end of 2014 than you are today? Let God have your life, your *whole* life. Let the Holy Spirit, who lives in you, work in you to make you more and more like Christ. In the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, make every effort to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs all the glory forever and ever (2 Peter 3:18).

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.