We are continuing our sermon series on the Naval Academy mission. Our primary scripture passage that we'll be taking a look at comes from 2 Peter 1:5: “Make every effort to add to your faith goodness…” The word goodness is described as virtue in the King James Version. This particular word is used a few times in Scripture. In the classical era, it was defined as “that quality given by the gods which enabled mere mortal men to perform heroic deeds.” It is that quality in a person’s life which makes them stand out as excellent. It is a term of moral heroism, moral courage, and moral excellence. And I'm sure it's no coincidence that the founding fathers of this institution chose that word to describe a critical part of this Academy's mission. We understand that morality is the defining of what is right and wrong; keeping one’s self pure from evil AND performing acts of righteousness.

Our country, our world, needs those kinds of leaders. Our culture is very much like those described in the book of Judges where it says that "everyone did what was right in his own eyes." (Judges 21:25) Some would ask, well, what's wrong with that? To each his own.

Those of us who have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ recognize that there is more to life than fleeting personal preferences. While individually we may not know the answer to every moral question, we are aware that there are answers - answers that apply to all of us.

The apostle Paul reminded young Timothy of the importance of the Scriptures, in 2 Tim. 3:16-17, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for re-proof, for
correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

So we have a moral code by which we make our decisions in life. But living out this code, this morality, is challenging in a culture that is predominately neutral at best toward issues of faith.

When I visited China in 2007 I quickly learned that there is no such thing as customer service. I waited for a half hour to change money at the bank. When I realized I missed my turn when the tellers called my number, they made me take another number and wait another half hour. The culture is such that you have to literally fight your way to the front of a line if you ever want to get there. Elbow your way through. No apologies. At one point during our week long stay there, I'd had enough. I was tired and I just wanted to get somewhere in the midst of the crowd. And I started throwing elbows and I found myself with escalating emotion ready to take out the next person who got in my way. And then I stopped and had this moment of sanity when I realized that I was getting caught up in mob mentality.

It is a dangerous thing to be caught up in a mob mentality. To get caught up in the mob mentality places you in danger of having your values and actions molded by the pressure of the crowd and the emotion of the moment.

Living for Christ in our culture puts us in a position where we are tempted to become a part of the crowd. The temptation to fit in and go along is very strong. We want to be like everybody else, and have everybody like us. We will do almost anything to be accepted. But in the process you lose who you are. You no longer have an identity. You no longer stand for anything, because you cannot stand against what the majority are doing and thinking. At one time you really loved Jesus and were committed to him, but it did not go over well with people, and they didn’t seem to understand. You found that people rejected you, and you no longer felt like you fit in. It was much easier to drop your faith than make new friends, so you forgot about your relationship with Jesus, or you cooled off a lot.
Our goal should never be the approval of this world. Remember that the Bible says, “I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:1-2).

The Apostle Paul commands us, in Romans 12:2: "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." Note that our spiritual transformation is directly tied to the renewing of our minds. Our lives, prior to becoming Christians, are conformed to this world because our minds have been programmed by the world - its views, values and code of conduct. To be different from the world we must re-program our minds.

Listen carefully to Proverbs 4:23, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the well-spring of life." The word heart here is the same as mind. The wise man is saying that whatever is placed in the heart or mind manifests itself in our lives. It will shape our thoughts, words, and actions. Jesus restates this in Matthew 12:25: "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him." In other words, be careful of what thoughts you allow in your mind. Garbage in, garbage out.

If you're struggling in your faith today, let me encourage you this morning. First, keep your focus on the goal. The goal of the Christian life is to please God, not people. Our goal is not aimed at what takes place here and now, but where we will spend eternity. Determine that you will not be a people pleaser, but a person who seeks to please God above all.

You have to determine that even if every other person in the world who claims to be a Christian is a fake, you will remain true. You have to determine that even if no one else seems to care, you will care. You have to determine that even if it doesn’t
seem to matter, and you can’t see that it is making any
difference, you will continue to serve God with all your heart.
The Bible says, “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your
spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in
affliction, faithful in prayer” (Romans 12:11-12).

Friday morning at PEP, our motivational physical fitness
time, one of the detailers asked me, "How is it that you
chaplains are always so happy?" I told him it’s a God thing.
Don't get me wrong, we have our moments, but we are joyful in
hope, keeping our eyes on the goal which is pleasing God and
out of his goodness, he blesses us.

Focus on fact, not feeling. We cannot depend on our
emotions, because they tend to cloud reality. Our enemy will tell
you lies. That’s what enemies do. But when you focus on
Christ’s faithfulness throughout history, you'll see he is faithful
and much more consistent than our human emotions. Human
emotions are good; they are God given. But don't allow your
perception to be clouded by them. Keep focused on fact, rather
than feeling. The facts are God loves you more you possibly
imagine and he has a great plan for your life, one that is greater
than you could ever dream. So don’t be discouraged by your
circumstances, be encouraged by the faithfulness of God.
Maintain your commitment regardless of how things look.

Focus on growth. In our scripture today, Peter
emphasized growth, adding to, building upon our faith, which is
the foundation for everything that follows. This is key. If you
just focus on fire insurance and getting into heaven, then you
only do what you think is necessary to be secure. But when you
focus on growth, two things happen.

First, your focus is not on perfection. You won’t get
discouraged because you make a mistake or fail in some way.
Your emphasis is on growing, and growth is never a straight line
upward; it is always a jagged, up and down line that progresses
upward. Your goal is not to be a perfect person, but to be a
growing person — a constantly growing person. Then you begin
to understand that you are not earning your way into heaven,
you are seeking to be transformed into the character of Christ. You have not arrived, but you are on the journey. Peter said, “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” (2 Peter 1:5-7). You are not nearly as tempted to give up when you realize that this is a process — a journey that you will be on all your life here, and beyond.

The second thing this accomplishes is that you maintain the excitement of what it means to walk with Christ. You don’t stop and sit down. You don’t think it is over and done with. You don’t say, “Okay, I accepted Jesus as my Savior, my sins are forgiven, and I'm good to go." You prepare for the journey, and you wake up every day ready to walk with Christ through the day. You understand that every day will present you with new challenges which will help you grow. And even better, you'll recognize that pain does serve a higher purpose.

Associate with people who are committed to the same ideals. I cannot say it any better or more direct than Paul in 1 Cor. 15:33, "Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals." Peer pressure is a wonderful thing when you have the right peers. We need encouragement and accountability.

There was a time in my life when I was walking down a wrong path. I was blinded by my own sin and selfishness. I called my friend Kellie and as she was speaking the truth in love, it was like she was speaking in gibberish. Finally, I said, you're going to have to break it down Barney style. I'm not getting it. She said firmly, but lovingly, you know better than to have made that choice. Then she helped me pick up the pieces of my life and brush off my knees from my stumble. The pain I experienced because of my poor choices could have been so much worse, but I got back on track. All because someone who loves me held me accountable. I pray you surround yourself with people like that.
Seek God’s help. Hebrews 4:14-16 says, "we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses...Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." One of the things I appreciate most about my chain of command is that my leaders constantly set me up for success by giving me the resources I need to do my job well. That part of leadership directly reflects God's character. God created us, but he didn't just plant us here on our own. He gives us all we need to continue growing in virtue and goodness. Are we going to hit road bumps? Yup. Some of us may stumble big time. But he'll never leave us or forsake us.

All of what I've shared assumes you have a personal relationship with God through his son, Jesus Christ. But I know in a crowd this size that it is likely that there are some of you who aren't quite tracking with me. If you've checked out, now's a great time to jump back in. Let me share something with you that has the potential to change your life...in a good way. You are God's masterpiece. You are created in his image (likeness). Long before you even knew your own name and since then, you have made choices that have separated you from God. It's kind of like when there's tension between you and a friend/spouse/significant other. You know the other person is there but you're not fully connected because something has come between you. And that something that has come between you and God is called sin. And until that is taken care of, there will always be a part of you that feels like something's missing. There is a God shaped hole in each of us that only God can fill. You've chased after all kinds of things to fill it and they've been less and less satisfying. Here's the good news. Jesus came to pay the penalty for your sin so you can be in relationship with God. God loves you, no matter what you've done or not done. And he wants a relationship with you. All it takes is a simple prayer asking him to come into your life. But before I invite you to pray that with me, I just want to clue you in. If you're squirming in your seat right now, that's because our spiritual enemy does not want you
to hear this. His goal is to make your life miserable and he knows that when you come into a relationship with God, Satan has lost your soul forever. So if you're squirming, I would suggest to you that God is working on your heart. If you're ready to say goodbye to insecurity and hello to deep rooted joy that cannot be explained, I invite you to pray with me:

   God, I know I made choices that have separated me from you. I acknowledge that you are Lord of the universe and you know me better than I know myself. Please forgive me for rebelling against you and come into my life as my Lord and Savior. In Jesus' name, Amen.

   If you prayed that prayer, please talk with a chaplain or spiritual leader in our congregation who can help you on your new journey.

   The apostle Paul said, I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6) Let's dedicate ourselves to this good work, to be moral leaders so we can make a difference in our world and bring glory to God. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

   Creator God, There is no greater liberation than to experience this freedom from sin and death that you have provided for us through Jesus Christ. Today our hearts and our souls are free to praise you. For this we are thankful.

   As we celebrate the birth of our country this weekend, we are reminded of those who have sacrificed for our freedom, following the example of your Son, Jesus Christ. Let us not take our freedom, both physical and spiritual, for granted. May we always remember that our freedom was purchased with a very high price.

   Lord, comfort and strengthen the families and loved ones of those who paid the price this week. Bless those who have served and continue to give their lives for our freedom. With favor and bounty meet their needs and watch over their families.
Help us to live our lives in a way that glorify you, Lord. Give us the strength to be a blessing in someone's life today, and grant us the opportunity to lead others into the freedom that can be found in knowing Christ. Amen.