

BE CAREFUL IN FOLLOWING YOUR CHRISTIAN CALLING

Sermon for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter, 2017

1 Peter 1:17-25

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second reading from before, 1 Peter 1:17-25: <sup>17</sup> **Moreover, since you call on Him as your Father, who judges impartially, according to what each person has done, conduct yourselves reverently, as you spend your time as resident foreigners!** <sup>18</sup> **For you know that you have not been redeemed with perishable things, with silver or gold, from the worthless lives you had handed over to you from your fathers,** <sup>19</sup> **but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a spotless and unblemished lamb.** <sup>20</sup> **He was chosen previously, before the foundation of the world, but was revealed in the last period of time for your sakes.** <sup>21</sup> **Through Him you believe in God, who has raised Him from the dead and has given Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.**

<sup>22</sup> **You have purified yourselves by obeying the truth, with the result that the love that you have for your fellow-Christians is not insincere. Therefore, love one another eagerly with pure hearts!** <sup>23</sup> **For you have been born again, not from a seed that can perish, but from one that cannot perish, through the Word of God, which lives and remains.** <sup>24</sup> **For “All human beings are like grass, and all their glory is like the flower of the grass. The grass withers and the flower falls off,** <sup>25</sup> **but the Word of the Lord remains for ever.” This is the Word that has been told to you as the Good News.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

We all have something we enjoy doing as a pastime, a hobby. Something that perhaps for a little while helps to take away a bit of the stress and tension of our busy lifestyles. Speaking of stress and tension, let me tell you that nothing takes that away better than to regularly come into God's house to hear the Word and receive the Supper! Yet being a Christian is not some kind of pastime or hobby: It is a way of life. Speaking to the men of Athens, and quoting one of their poets, the Apostle Paul once said, "*In Him (the Lord God) we live and move and have our being,*" (Acts 17:28).<sup>1</sup> Being a Christian doesn't mean only going to church any time we feel like we might need to. The devil would like us to believe that there is such a thing as being a part-time Christian. Our own carelessness and absorption in temporal things to the exclusion of our religious life, the inclination of our sinful hearts to follow the lusts of the flesh - it's a constant threat to our reaching heaven.

Perhaps you can remember how it used to be that churches were nearly always full for divine services every week. It's not so today. Sure, some of these faithful saints have since gone to heaven, but there are still so many in our own community who were once confessing Christians but have now drifted away from God. Even our own church has not been spared. So the Scriptures constantly warn us against laxity and encourage us to real Christian living. The Apostle Peter, with powerful inducements from God, exhorts and urges us today to be careful in following our Christian calling.

Peter begins by reminding us that our redemption brings wonderful things so don't lose them.

To counteract the danger of becoming careless, Peter supplies a number of incentives to live our life in holy reverence. He begins by saying, **"Moreover, since you call on Him as your Father, who judges**

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<sup>1</sup> Paul here refers to pagan poets who, through their natural knowledge of God (Rm 1:20-21), correctly assessed and asserted this truth about the Creator God. C 600 BC, Epimenides concluded that one god is the creator and sustainer of all life.

**impartially, according to what each person has done, conduct yourselves reverently, as you spend your time as resident foreigners!”**

What is meant by the words, “**What each person has done**”? This is your total life as a Christian. It reminds us of that description which our Lord Jesus gives us of Judgment Day. On that day, He will say to some: “*I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in,*<sup>36</sup> *I needed clothes and you clothed Me, I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you came to visit Me.*” And the redeemed will say: “*Lord, when did we ever do these things for you?*” He will answer, “*I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for Me,*” (Matt. 25:35-40, paraphrased).

Now don’t get the wrong idea: it is **not** as though our good works shall save us after all. Numerous Bible passages make it clear that we are saved only by the grace of God, only through faith in Christ.<sup>2</sup> But those who have received the grace of God become gracious people. Those who have been given the gift of faith become faithful people. Or as Jesus put it in the Beatitudes, “*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy,*” (Matt. 5:7). The presence or absence of our works will be the evidence of whether or not our faith was genuine. James asks, “*What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?*” (James 2:14). And if we will only remember that we came to be Christians in a very special way, this life of service will not seem unreasonable.

We were all born into slavery - a state of slavery for which there seemed no escape for us, since the whole inclination of our heart was to sin. This is the vain tradition which Peter says was **handed over to you from your fathers** - a way of life that had no hope to offer. Peter may have been referring to Jewish listeners, people who grew up under the yoke of Judaism, rabbinic legalism, and the Talmud (a mammoth compendium of

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<sup>2</sup> Eph. 2:8, Luke 7:50, 1 Peter 1:9, Rom. 5:1, Gal. 3:14, to name a few

opinions of the rabbis). That way of life had become empty, for it dissolved the sure words of God into a babble of conflicting human opinions and interpretations. It was empty because it made demands of holiness and austerity on people without the forgiving grace and mercy of the Messiah. That way of life always leads either to pride, imagining that your own efforts are good enough for God, or to despair, knowing that your own efforts will never be good enough for God. What an empty way to spend your life! Praise the Lord that He intervened! He paid the price that bought our freedom from that slavery. And just look at that price! We have not **been redeemed with perishable things, with silver or gold... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a spotless and unblemished lamb**. The sacrificial lambs of the Old Testament ceremonial laws had to be outwardly perfect, without defect or blemish (Exodus 12:5). They symbolised the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. On the cross, outwardly, Jesus didn't look too good - as Isaiah said prophetically, "*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him,*" (53:2), but His was an inward perfection, without defect or blemish of sin.<sup>3</sup> The blood of Jesus Christ has done what no other religion or philosophy in human history could do - remove sinful guilt from human beings and put in its place God's own righteousness, and all this as God's gift, received by faith. The Father showed that He accepted the Son's sacrificial gift by raising Him from the dead and glorifying Him at His right hand. This is our faith; this is our hope.

Christ's sacrifice was to purchase our freedom so that in real liberty of the spirit we could serve the living God with a willing heart. Can you therefore see that if we continue to live in a way that displeases God, we are acting contrary to our better knowledge. If it was worth the death of Christ on the cross to free us from sin, it would be rankest ingratitude in us ever to treat the whole matter lightly. For if He paid for our lives, they most certainly belong to Him and not to the devil.

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 7:26

It is certainly a good spiritual exercise for us to ponder long and often on our Saviour's humiliation and death. But let us not become so absorbed in this one fact of our redemption that we lose sight of His true glory. It is not your sympathy He wants but your heart's devotion. Remember, too, that He is your King enthroned in splendour. **God... has raised Him from the dead and has given Him glory**. Our Lord reigns in heaven. He is the Fountain of all good things in your life. He is with you always to guide and protect you. What a comfort it is to us to have such a clearly revealed vision of our heavenly King! For ages men dreamed of that great day when He would reveal Himself. For centuries, they longed to see God's promises fulfilled. The faith of such men as Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, all of them men of great faith, was based altogether on what God had told them would *someday* happen. And about all this God says: "All this My Son did **so that your faith and hope are in Me.**"

When we are tempted to forget God and to act contrary to His holy Ten Commandments, see what answers He can give to temptation: The good and gracious God in heaven permits and invites us to call Him our **Father**. He is the One who **judges impartially**. To be sure that He could pass a judgment of mercy and take us to His eternal kingdom, He has sent His Son to live and die - for us. Jesus has paid for our redemption and has so guided the course of history that His church, bearing His everlasting Gospel, was also in this place where we live. Despite the weakness of men, He has preserved that blessed Gospel and the holy Sacraments in this church. And all this time He had me and you in mind! "*How, then, can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?*"<sup>4</sup>

Now Peter goes on to remind us that since we have redemption, which is a wonderful gift, we ought to use it well.

Peter reminds us that through our obedience to the saving truth of our redemption through the blood of Christ we have purified our souls. He says, "<sup>22</sup> **(We) have purified (ourselves) by obeying the truth.**" To show

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 39:9

that for us that this thing is settled, he uses the word in such a way that it can refer only to a completed past act. Where true faith exists, trusting in this completed sacrifice, there the soul is in a purified state. So now the whole man is able once again to carry out the will of God. And what is that will of God? That will of God for us as members of human society is that we love. Jesus says to His followers: “A *new commandment I give to you: that you love one another,*” (John 13:34).

This love we have for our fellow travellers through life is now more fully defined so that we make no mistake about its nature. It is not to be **insincere**. Rather, it is to be an intense love that comes not only from the lips but from our whole being. It expresses itself in those unselfish acts of love that make us, as Luther states it, *little Christs in this world*.<sup>5</sup>

To love with the love of God, to love with **pure hearts**, this is a far cry from what is generally described as love by those who know nothing of the power of God in the life of a man. The purely human emotion of love is a thing that is ever directed toward oneself. It must meet with some kind of response to stay alive. And we see too much of this sort of love trying to pass for the real thing in the church. How often we hear the complaints of disappointed love that has oneself as its centre! “I was on this or that committee for months; and not one word of appreciation.” “I tried to be his friend, but look how I was treated! I’ll never do anything for him again.” “I try to do what’s right. But what’s the use? Nobody ever does anything for me.” “She did much less than I did. Everybody thanks her. Nobody thanks me.” And all this flurry of self-pity poses as the love of God. Now let us imagine for a moment that God loved us like that. Then His Word would have to read: “I forgave your sins. You sinned again. That’s the last thing I do for you!” “Don’t come crying to Me with your troubles. I helped you once; and what thanks did I get for it?” “I did you one favour. What have you ever done for Me?” “I furnished you with food and health and all good things for years. Now let somebody else do something. I’ve done more than

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<sup>5</sup> The Freedom of a Christian (1520)

My share. It gets mighty tiresome to be called on every time somebody needs something.”

See how He does love us with His perfect love. Every Sunday we must confess before Him: “*We have sinned against You by thought, word, and deed.*” Knowing that we shall never be able to repay Him, we cry over and over again: “*Have mercy upon us!*” Morning, noon, and night, day after day, year in and year out, we disobey, we sin, we neglect to do as our heavenly Father tells us. And what is the response of His love? He keeps on telling us: “*With an everlasting love I have loved you. As often as you ask, you shall receive. As a father pities his children, so I pity them that fear Me. My strength is always there to support your weakness. Be of good cheer; I forgive you all your sins. My mercy endures forever.*” This is the love of God, an unswerving determination to help the helpless, to support the feeble, to be patient with the thoughtless, to forgive the wayward, to pour into our lives a never-ending stream of kindnesses. And for us to love with the love of God, to **love one another eagerly with pure hearts**, means to do good to our fellow-men, whether they deserve it or not, to serve without the expectation of reward or gratitude, to serve for no other reason than that we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works.

In the concluding verses of our text Peter reminds us that we are capable of divine love. In Christ Jesus, we **have been born again**. When we heard the Gospel of Christ preached to us, God the Holy Spirit planted in our hearts the seed that grows up into the fear and love of God. Just as we were redeemed by the imperishable blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, so we are begotten by an imperishable seed: <sup>23</sup> **For you have been born again, not from a seed that can perish, but from one that cannot perish, through the Word of God, which lives and remains.** It changes us into His own kind. This Gospel seed has the divine power to recreate us, to make us the children of God by faith. To emphasise the effectiveness and enduring quality of this source of the Christian life, the apostle quotes the prophet Isaiah, who says: “**All human beings are like grass, and all their glory is**

**like the flower of the grass. The grass withers and the flower falls off,<sup>25</sup> but the Word of the Lord remains for ever.”**

Grass seed can produce only grass, which lives only for a short season before it dies, to be replaced by another crop. Like the grass, sinful man can produce only sinful man, with no nobler virtues than the universal frailty and imperfection and sinfulness of man, with not a trace of the image of God, **but the Word of the Lord remains for ever**. When it is heard, it falls like a seed into the heart. And if it takes root in the heart, it becomes living, active with divine power. The image of God is being restored. We who are reborn in the likeness of God become capable of living in the likeness of God. It is this goodness of God that needs room to express itself in our lives.

May the contemplation of the mercies of God encourage us to grateful service, presenting our bodies to Him as a living sacrifice of praise and gratitude. May the crucified Lord of glory so live in our hearts that we walk before Him in childlike fear, and may our lives, purchased with His blood, purified by His Word, become an ever brighter reflection of His love, so that men may see our works of love and learn to join us in giving glory to our Father in heaven. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, You have sent Your Son into the world, not to be served, but to serve and to give His life to redeem all people. After He had offered His life as the one sacrifice for all sins for ever, You raised Him from the dead by Your glorious power. Give us a living faith in Him, so that we may possess the sure hope of eternal life through Him. We thank You for all Your kindness in our lives. Do not let us forget that every good gift comes from You.

We thank You for taking away the darkness of our minds and spirits, and for revealing to us Your Word of truth in Jesus Christ. Pour out Your Spirit

on us, that He may keep us spiritually alive through Your Word in our hearts. Give us deeper understanding of Your truth, and of Your great love for us.

We thank You for the fellowship of believers that we have in Your church. Protect your church from enemies without, and keep us all in the unity that the Spirit gives. Prevent disunity, party spirit, and discord from giving Satan a foothold among us. Keep us all in Christ Jesus by faith and joyful obedience, and in loyalty to Your infallible Word. Shower Your blessings upon Your Church everywhere, and give it success in all Your work.

Give us opportunities to tell the Gospel to others who need to hear it, and give us the wisdom and the courage to use them. Enable us to draw people into Your Word, through which Your Spirit works faith, and fill us with the message of Jesus' resurrection and the ability to tell it forth.

We thank You for giving us Christian homes. Surround every family with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, that love, peace, forgiveness, comfort, joy, and moral purity may fill our lives.

We thank You, Lord, for the blessings we enjoy in our rich land. Defend it, both within and without, from all who would harm it by sin, undermine it by strife and rebellion, or destroy it by war.

We thank You, O Father, for the gifts of our daily bread, for health and healing, education and social joys, friends and companions, and all the beauties and wonders of Your creation. Give us weather that is appropriate for our needs. Alongside all the blessings that you give us daily and richly, give us, as well, joyful and thankful hearts, and the willingness to use what You give us to serve You.

We commend to Your gracious care those among us who are ill, lonely, or depressed. We remember especially the members of our congregations not able to come to church today because of ongoing illnesses or because they are in nursing homes. Comfort them with the good news of their

redemption and the hope of life eternal through Jesus' sacrificial death and glorious resurrection.

Surround us with Your love, and finally receive us into perfect, unbroken fellowship with You and our Saviour Jesus Christ. Hear the prayers we bring You in His precious name. Amen.

### THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2:14a, 36-41

<sup>14</sup>a Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and addressed them: ...

<sup>36</sup> "Therefore all the people of Israel should know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, Lord, and Christ!"

<sup>37</sup> When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart. They asked Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what are we to do?"

<sup>38</sup> Peter answered them: "Repent, and let every one of you be baptised, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> For this promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far away, all whom the Lord, our God, calls."

<sup>40</sup> With many other words he testified to them by argument. He

urged them, "Be saved from this crooked kind of people!"

<sup>41</sup> Those who received what he said were baptised; and that day about three thousand persons were added.

1 Peter 1:17-25

<sup>17</sup> Moreover, since you call on Him as your Father, who judges impartially, according to what each person has done, conduct yourselves reverently, as you spend your time as resident foreigners! <sup>18</sup> For you know that you have not been redeemed with perishable things, with silver or gold, from the worthless lives you had handed over to you from your fathers, <sup>19</sup> but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a spotless and unblemished lamb.

<sup>20</sup> He was chosen previously, before the foundation of the world, but was revealed in the last period of time for your sakes.

<sup>21</sup> Through Him you believe in God, who has raised Him from

the dead and has given Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

<sup>22</sup> You have purified yourselves by obeying the truth, with the result that the love that you have for your fellow-Christians is not insincere. Therefore, love one another eagerly with pure hearts!

<sup>23</sup> For you have been born again, not from a seed that can perish, but from one that cannot perish, through the Word of God, which lives and remains. <sup>24</sup> For “All human beings are like grass, and all their glory is like the flower of the grass. The grass withers and the flower falls off, <sup>25</sup> but the Word of the Lord remains for ever.” This is the Word that has been told to you as the Good News.

Luke 24:13-35

<sup>13</sup> On the same day, two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, eleven kilometres from Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> They were talking with each other about all of these things, which had happened. <sup>15</sup> While they were talking and discussing, Jesus Himself came up to them and began to walk

along with them. <sup>16</sup> Their eyes were re-strained, so that they did not know who He was. <sup>17</sup> He asked them, “What are you discussing with one another as you are walking along?”

They stood still, with gloomy faces. <sup>18</sup> The one by the name of Cleopas asked Him, “Are you the only visitor staying in Jerusalem, and do you not know what things have happened there during these days?”

<sup>19</sup> He asked, “What things?”

They told him, “The things about Jesus from Nazareth, who was a Prophet, mighty in what He did and said before God and all the people, <sup>20</sup> and how our chief priests and officials handed Him over to be sentenced to death, and crucified Him. <sup>21</sup> However, we were hoping that He would be the One who was going to redeem Israel. What is more, today is the third day since these things have happened. <sup>22</sup> However, then some of our women startled us. They went to the tomb early this morning, <sup>23</sup> and did not find His body. They came and told us that they had even seen a vision of an-

gels, who said that He is alive.<sup>24</sup> Some of our companions went to the tomb and found it as the women had said, but they did not see Him.”

<sup>25</sup> Jesus told them, “O foolish people, and slow in your hearts to believe everything that the prophets have said!<sup>26</sup> Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and enter into His glory?”<sup>27</sup> Then He began from Moses and all the other prophets and explained to them what had been said about Himself in all the Scriptures.

<sup>28</sup> They approached the village to which they were going, and He acted as if He were going further.

<sup>29</sup> They urged Him strongly, “Stay with us! It is nearly evening, and the day has almost gone.”

So He went in, to stay with them.

<sup>30</sup> When He sat at the table with them, He took the bread and said a blessing. He broke it and began to give it to them.<sup>31</sup> Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised Him. However, He vanished from them.

<sup>32</sup> They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning in us as He was speaking to us on the road, and as He was opening the Scriptures to us?”

<sup>33</sup> That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem. They found the Eleven and those who were with them gathered together.<sup>34</sup> They were saying, “The Lord really has risen, and has appeared to Simon.”

<sup>35</sup> Then the two related what had happened on the road, and how they had recognised Jesus when He was breaking the bread.