

Selected Sermons #18

The Festival Half of the Church Year by E. Schaller

I Peter 1:13-16 Oculi

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

Fellow redeemed by the life and death of our Savior –

It is pleasant to watch a skillful craftsperson working at a trade. Last winter people hereabouts had opportunity to see a glass blower do the work of making various objects by blowing hot, liquid glass into bubbles at the end of a tube. How simple it looked; so easy to do! We enjoy watching a trained athlete, a good football or basketball player. How interesting it would be to stand by while someone builds one of those little ships inside a bottle! Such people are able to make their work look very easy, so that we must force ourselves not to forget that in all such skills there is very much which we cannot see – namely, the years of practice - the hours of painstaking exercise, and the strain of self-control.

It is not always so pleasant to watch a Christian at his or her trade. What is the Christian's trade? In the first place, of course, a Christian is a believer. Faith is the chief skill – but faith is something we cannot see. We can watch faith only as it expresses itself in a godly life by words and deeds. We have been admonished often enough that a Christian is expected to walk in godliness; we know that in this we ought to be an expert and it should be a joy to watch us practice our life.

But it is not so. The way we live, we often make godliness look very hard. And why is that? Because we forget that godliness is an art that requires just as much (*and more*) control, hard work, and practice as any profession. We know that we are to lead Christian lives, but we think it is enough to work at it in a hit-or-miss fashion. If a glass blower or an athlete approached their profession in that frame of mind, they would be a failure and stay one. A Christian would also be a failure if there were no real process behind the scenes. The thought contained in the Epistle that is set forth by an apostle not only urges us on to godliness, but also warns against a hit-or-miss laziness. Let us consider . . .

The Christian control of godliness, as it is:

- I. Encouraged by our hope**
- II. Made necessary by our nature,**
- III. Required by our adoption as children**

I. When we speak of control, we know that we are speaking about something that requires effort. A car out of control runs free; a car under control means effort, watchfulness, pressure on the brake, and care in steering. Our work in controlling a car is encouraged by our hope that in doing so we will stay alive and not be killed. Thus in **urging the Christian to control godliness in living, the apostle offers as encouragement that the effort will be reward in hope and a renewed life.**

Rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. This sentence is the real beginning of our text, since this is how the apostle wants to touch Christian hearts. A Christian is nothing more or less than a person who believes and puts trust in saving grace and the mercy of God which lies in and behind every word and promise of the Bible. The Christian believes that God is merciful for the sake of Jesus Christ. A Christian looks at the wounds and the suffering of the Savior and says, *“He was wounded for my transgressions and bruised for my iniquities.”* The Christian believes that God can be merciful toward a believer despite their sins because Christ paid the price for all sins; he believes that God is merciful and has forgiven all sins. And **upon this grace of God the Christian builds a hope** – namely, that when the day comes that Jesus Christ is revealed, when he comes in glory as Judge of the living and the

dead, then the grace of God will be revealed. God will make it good, as he promised. As Christians we will see that God's grace can not only offer us forgiveness, but certainly also life and salvation.

The apostle **urges the Christian to rest in hope of this grace to the very end** – and we fully intend to do so. We fully agree with Peter's opening words of this letter, *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.”*

Such is our hope, which now must also cause us to bestir ourselves to action, for hoping is not a simple matter; it is much more than just a wish. To illustrate this, let me point again to the athlete whose hope is to win a game or establish a record. Here surely we may see the meaning of hope, for the athlete who hopes does more than merely wish. You cannot think of him or her as one who lies in a hammock and hopes to become victorious. The athlete hope is expressed in action. **The athlete works at it, encouraged by the hope within.**

And so the Christian, hoping to the end of life itself is an active expression of faith. Does not Peter say we are

“begotten again to a living hope”? Yes, hope is active. No wonder it is sometimes easy to see that a Christian is living with hope in their life - but if one does not work at it, this hope does not mean much and will not show itself in life.

II. But why need we work at it? That is explained as the apostle tells **how it is done** - for here we see that those who hope for heaven by the grace of God have to contend in a bitter struggle with their nature and control it. *Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance.*

The custom of *girding the loins* is an ancient one. In Bible days the people (men and women alike) wore long, flowing garments reaching to the ankles. They were cool and comfortable and served well except when walking was required, when the long gowns got in the way. And it was a question with each traveler, *“Shall I permit my clothes to control me so that I cannot walk smoothly where I want but must allow my feet to travel as best they can with my clothes constantly getting in the way?”* The answer to that was a belt fastened about the clothing at the hips, a girdle which held the gown up to the knees and kept it arranged for walking. *“Girding the loins”* means to establish rigid

control for a steady progress forward with few entanglements.

Anyone who has hope must **be prepared to establish such control over oneself**. Let us take the athlete again. Lately great crowds have been watching basketball tournaments, where they saw the best teams in the state striving for the championship. The spectators thrilled at the endurance, skill, and ability of those athletes. How many remember that the athletes did not excel because they were born that way? If they had permitted themselves to be controlled by their natural instincts, they would have failed. If they had just let themselves go, their human nature would not have led them to the tournament floor. NO, there was training behind it. *They girded up the loins of their mind*. They did not always eat what they wanted, lie down when tired, or indulge their fancies, but kept a strict schedule as proof of their serious purpose. They not only had hope, but they meant it and brought their bodies into subjection.

We Christians have hope, but we also have a human mind full of desires and lusts and appetites. It is bound to happen that **if our natural mind had its way; it would lead us away from our hope**. By nature we give attention to fleshly things. The result will be deeds of the flesh, living like the heathen live in their ignorance and not as obedient children of God in holiness. Thus Judas,

following his natural mind, took to the bright gleam of silver and lost heaven over it. Shall we be fools not to realize that walking as heirs of salvation cannot be done if we let our natural wishes flap loosely around?

Alas, too often Christians are prisoners of **their fleshly minds** instead of being the masters. They think living as Christians with a hope is easy. They do not want to work at it. That is why their performance is often so shameful. *“Gird up the loins of your mind,”* says the apostle. Godliness of life is a controlled skill. Fleshly lusts which war against the soul must be strapped tightly with the belt of soberness, of serious determination.

III. *“But,”* someone will object, *“we thought we were saved by grace. What then has our godliness to do with it? Of course, it is nice to be good – but is such severe effort really absolutely needful? Are not our sins forgiven?”* Ah, it is indeed just this reasoning that causes us to be so wretched and fall short of godliness. This slackness is evidence of our wayward minds. Put a belt around it and listen to the Lord, who tells us that **godliness is indeed necessary because it is required by our adoption as children.** *But as he who has called you to holy, you also be holy in all your conduct: because it is written, “Be holy; for I am holy.”*

We say that we have hope. How did we come by it? Is it only because God is merciful? What are the facts? God tells us most plainly that in Holy Baptism he not only cleansed us of our sins, he also adopted us as his children. Our hope is based upon this, as the apostle writes, *“If children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.”* (Romans 8:17)

We are now concerned with a **family matter**. It is not a little thing to be called children of God. What higher, nobler family could we be members of than the family of God? Once we were guttersnipes, people from the wrong side of the tracks - but now we bear God’s name and have a room in the royal palace. Such adopted children cannot keep on wearing the rags of their poverty or go about with the dirty faces of neglected orphans, and they cannot belong to the world’s *“problem children”*. **Adoption into the family of God brings with it certain great and real responsibilities.**

The Father of grace does not ignore sin. He does not hold with indifferent sinners. If he clothed us with heavenly garments, he did not do so expecting that we would trail them through the dirt of the world’s streets and befoul them, but that we would strive to keep them clean. God’s command is clear, *“Be holy.”*

Moreover, our ability in this direction is good. We have the belt ready-made to **strap up the sinful tendencies of our minds**. We have a bad inheritance from birth, but we can keep that well tied up – for the Holy Spirit, who is called the *“Spirit of holiness,”* has given us as power from on high to make godliness practical. We are able to live godly lives, and the Father expects us to do it, soberly. There is no excuse whatever for hit-and-miss Christianity among us. The only reward of that will be that our lusts will fashion us into children of disobedience and be cast out into outer darkness. **Your growth in godliness**, my brothers and sisters, should be a delight to watch. Your spouse or your child will delight in seeing it; the holy Christian Church will delight in it, inasmuch as we share with you this life. Your Father in heaven will delight in it, and so will the angels who always behold his face for that smile and that nod which a Father has for his dear child who indeed behave as his dear child.

May this be your accomplishment, in Jesus’ name!
Amen!

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