

Easter Wednesday;

Colossians 3:1-7

EXHORTATION TO TRULY GOOD WORKS.

Col. 3:1-7

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience: In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them.

1. We have been hearing of the glorious message of Christ's resurrection, how that resurrection took place and how we must believe, for our own blessing, comfort and salvation. Now, that we may be sincerely thankful to God for this inestimable blessing, and that our attitude toward the doctrine of the resurrection may be one to truly honor and glorify it, we must hear also, and practice, the apostles' teaching of its essential fruits, and must manifest them in our lives. Therefore, we will select Paul's admonition to the Colossians (ch. 3), which has to do with this topic particularly. Observe here, Paul exhorts Christians to be incited by the resurrection of Christ unto works truly good and becoming; the text declares unto us the supreme blessing and happiness the resurrection brings within our reach - remission of sins and salvation from eternal death. Lest, however, our wanton, indolent nature deceive itself by imagining the work is instantaneously wrought in ourselves, and that simply to receive the message is to exhaust the blessing, Paul always adds the injunction to examine our hearts to ascertain whether we rightly apprehend the resurrection truth.

HOW WE ARE RISEN WITH CHRIST.

2. By no means are we simply to assent to the words of the doctrine. Christ does not design that we be able merely to accept and speak intelligently of it, but that its influence be manifest in our lives. How is a dead man profited, however much life may be preached to him, if that preaching does not make him live? Or of what use is it to preach righteousness to a sinner if he remain in sin? or to an erring, factious individual if he forsake not his error and his darkness? Even so, it is not only useless but detrimental, even pernicious in effect, to

listen to the glorious, comforting and saving doctrine of the resurrection if the heart has no experience of its truth; if it means naught but a sound in the ears, a transitory word upon the tongue, with no more effect upon the hearer than as if he had never heard. According to Paul in the text, this nobly-wrought and precious resurrection of Christ essentially must be, not an idle tale of fancy, futile as a dead hewn-stone or painted-paper image, but a powerful energy working in us a resurrection through faith - an experience he calls being risen with Christ; in other words, it is dying unto sin, being snatched from the power of death and hell and having life and happiness in Christ. In the second chapter (verse 12), the apostle puts it plainly, *"buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead."*

3. If, Paul says, ye have apprehended by faith the resurrection of Christ and have received its power and consolation, and so are risen with him, that resurrection will surely be manifest in you; you will feel its power, will be conscious of its working within. The doctrine will be something more than words; it will be truth and life. For them who do not thus apprehend the resurrection, Christ is not yet risen, although his rising is none the less a fact; for there is not within them the power represented by the words "being risen with Christ," the power which renders them truly dead and truly risen men. So Paul's intent is to make us aware that before we can become Christians, this power must operate within us; otherwise, though we may boast and fancy ourselves believing Christians, it will not be true. The test is, are we risen in Christ - is his resurrection effective in us? Is it merely a doctrine of words, or one of life and operating power?

4. Now, what is the process of the life and death mentioned? How can we be dead and at the same time risen? If we are Christians we must have suffered death; yet the very fact that we are Christians implies that we live. How is this paradox to be explained? Indeed, certain false teachers of the apostles' time understood and explained the words in a narrow sense making them mean that the resurrection of the dead is a thing of the past according to Paul's words in Second Timothy 1, 10, and that there is no future resurrection from temporal death. The believer in Christ, they said, is already risen to life; in all Christians the resurrection is accomplished in this earthly life. They sought to prove their position by Paul's own words, thus assailing the article of the resurrection.

5. But we will ignore these teachers as being condemned by Paul, and interpret the words as he meant them, his remarks both preceding and following making it clear and unquestionable that he refers to the spiritual resurrection. This fact is certain: If we are, at the last day, to rise bodily, in our flesh and blood, to eternal life, we must have had a previous spiritual resurrection here on earth. Paul's words in Romans 8, 11 are: "But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwelleth in you, he that raised up Christ Jesus from the dead shall give life also to your mortal bodies through his Spirit that dwelleth in you." In other words: God having quickened, justified and saved you spiritually, he will not forget the body, the building or tabernacle of the living spirit; the spirit being in this life risen from sin and death, the tabernacle, or the corruptible flesh-and-blood garment, must

also be raised; it must emerge from the dust of earth, since it is the dwelling-place of the saved and risen spirit, that the two may be reunited unto life eternal.

6. The apostle, then, is not in this text referring to the future resurrection of the body, but to the spiritual rising which entails the former. He regards as one fact the resurrection of the Lord Christ, who brought his body again from the grave and entered into life eternal, and the resurrection of ourselves, who, by virtue of his rising, shall likewise be raised: first, the soul, from a trivial and guilty life shall rise into a true, divine and happy existence; and second, from this sinful and mortal body shall rise out of the grave an immortal, glorious one. So Paul terms believing Christians both "dead" and "alive." They are spiritually dead in this life and also spiritually alive. Nevertheless, this sinful temporal life must yet come to an end in physical death, for the destruction of the sin and death inherent therein, that body and spirit may live forever. Therefore he says: *"If then ye were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God."*

7. In other words: Seek and strive after what is above - the things divine, heavenly and eternal; not the terrestrial, perishable, worldly. Make manifest the fact that you are now spiritually raised and by the same power will later be raised bodily.

8. But does this mean that we, as Christians, are no more to eat and drink, to till the ground, to attend to domestic or public duties, or to engage in any kind of labor? Are we to live utterly idle, practically dead? Is that what you mean, Paul, when you say we are not to seek the things of earth, though all these are essentially incident to life? What can you say to the fact that Christ the Lord is, himself, with us on earth? for he said before his ascension to heaven (Mt 28, 20): "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world"; and also the baptism which he commands, the sacrament and the office of Gospel ministry whereby he governs his Church here - these are things of earth.

9. Paul, however, explains in the succeeding verse what he means by "things that are upon the earth" and "things that are above." He is not telling us to despise earthly objects. He does not refer to God's created things, all which are good, as God himself considered them; nor has he reference to the Christian who, in his earthly life, must deal with the things of creation. He has in mind the individual without knowledge of God; who knows no more, and aims no further, than reason teaches, that reason received from parents at physical birth; who is an unbeliever, ignorant of God and the future life and caring not for them; who follows only natural understanding and human desire and seeks merely personal benefit, honor, pride and pleasure. The apostle calls that a worldly life where the Word of God is lacking, or at least is disregarded, and where the devil has rule, impelling to all vices. Paul would say: Ye must be dead to a worldly life of this sort, a life striven after by the heathen, who disregard God's Word and suffer the devil to have his way with them. Ye must prove the resurrection of Christ in you to be something more than vain words. Ye must show there is a living power manifest in you because ye are risen, a power which makes you lead a different life, one in obedience to the Word and will of God, and called the divine, heavenly life. Where

this change does not take place, it is a sign ye are not yet Christians but are deceiving yourselves with vain fancies.

10. Under the phrase "*things that are upon the earth*" - worldly things - Paul includes not only gross, outward vices, sins censurable in the eyes of the world, but also greater immoralities; everything, in fact, not in accordance with the pure Word of God, faith and true Christian character.

SPIRITUAL AND CARNAL WORLDLINESS.

11. In order to a better understanding of the text, we shall adopt Paul's customary classification of life as spiritual and carnal. Life on earth is characterized as of the spirit, or spiritual; and of the flesh, or carnal. But the spiritual life may be worldly. The worldly spiritual life is represented by the vices of false and self-devised doctrine wherein the soul lives without the Word of God, in unbelief and in contempt of God; or, still worse, abuses the Word of God and the name of Christ in false doctrine, making them a cover and ornament for wicked fraud, using them falsely under a show of truth, under pretense of Christian love. This is worldly conduct of the spiritual kind. It is always the worst, ever the most injurious, since it is not only personal sin, but deceives others into like transgression. Paul refers, in the epistle lesson for Easter, to this evil as the "old leaven" and the "leaven of wickedness." And in Second Corinthians 7, 1, he makes the same classification of spiritual and carnal sin, saying, "Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit." By defilement of the spirit he means those secret, subtle vices wherewith man pollutes and corrupts his inner life in the sight of God; his sins not being manifest to the world, but deceiving human reason and wisdom.

12. If we would be Christians we must, first of all, be dead to conduct of this sort. We must not receive nor tolerate the worldly doctrine and corrupt inventions originating with ourselves, whether in the nature of reason, philosophy or law, theories ignoring the Word of God or else falsely passing under its name. For such are wholly of the world; under their influence man has no regard to God's will and seeks not his kingdom and eternal life. They are meant merely to further the individual's own honor, pride, renown, wisdom, holiness or something else. Though boast is made of the Gospel and of faith in Christ, yet it is not serious, and the individual continues without power and without fruit.

13. If we are risen with Christ through faith, we must set our affections upon things not earthly, corruptible, perishable, but upon things above - the heavenly, divine, eternal; in other words, upon doctrine right, pure and true, and whatever is pleasing to God, that his honor and Christ's kingdom may be preserved. Thus shall we guard ourselves against abuse of God's name, against false worship and false trust and that presumption of self-holiness which pollutes and defrauds the spirit.

14. Under carnal worldliness Paul includes the gross vices, enumerating in particular here, fornication, uncleanness, covetousness, and so on, things which reason knows to be wicked

and condemns as such. The spiritual sins take reason captive and deceive it, leaving it powerless to guard against them. They are termed spiritual sins not simply because of their spirit-polluting character, for all vices pollute the spirit, the carnal vices among them; but because they are too subtle for flesh and blood to discern. The sins of the flesh, however, are called carnal, or body-polluting, because committed by the body, in its members. Now, as we are to be dead unto spiritual sins, so are we to be dead unto carnal sins, or at least to make continual progress toward that end, striving ever to turn away from all such earthly things and to look toward the heavenly and divine. He who continues to seek carnal things and to be occupied with them, has not as yet with Christ died unto the world. Not having died, he is not risen; the resurrection of Christ effects nothing in him. Christ is dead unto him and he unto Christ.

15. Paul's admonition is particularly necessary at the present time. We see a large and constantly-increasing number who, despite their boast of the Gospel and their certain knowledge of the polluting and condemning power of spiritual and carnal sins, continue in their evil course, forgetful of God's wrath, or endeavoring to trust in false security. Indeed, it is a very common thing for men to do just as they please and yet pretend innocence and seek to avoid censure. Some would represent themselves guileless as lambs and blameless; no act of theirs may be regarded evil or even wrong. They pretend great virtue and Christian love. Yet they carry on their insidious, malicious frauds, imposing falsehoods upon men. They ingeniously contrive to make their conduct appear good, imagining that to pass as faultless before men and to escape public censure means to deceive God also. But they will learn how God looks upon the matter. Paul tells us (Gal 6, 7) God will not, like men, be mocked. To conceal and palliate will not avail. Nothing will answer but dying to vice and then striving after what is virtuous, divine and becoming the Christian character.

16. Paul enumerates some gross and unpardonable vices - fornication, or unchastity, and covetousness. He speaks also of these in Ephesians 5, 3-5 and in First Thessalonians 4, 3-7, as we have heard in the epistle lessons for the second and third Sundays in Lent. He enjoins Christians to guard against these sins, to be utterly dead to them. For they are sensual, acknowledged such even among the gentiles; while we strive after the perfect purity becoming souls who belong to Christ and in heaven. It is incumbent upon the Christian to preserve his body modest, and holy or chaste; to refrain from polluting himself by fornication and other unchastity, after the manner of the world.

17. Similarly does the apostle forbid covetousness, to which he gives the infamous name of idolatry in the effort to make it more hideous in the Christian's eyes, to induce him to shun it as an abominable vice intensely hated of God. It is a vice calculated to turn a man wholly from faith and from divine worship, until he regards not, nor seeks after, God and his Word and heavenly treasures, but follows only after the treasures of earth and seeks a god that will give him enough of earthly good.

18. Much might be said on this topic were we to consider it relative to all orders and trades in succession. For plainly the world, particularly in our day, is completely submerged in the

vice of covetousness. It is impossible to enumerate the subtle arts it can invent, and the good and beautiful things it knows how to pass off whereunder it masks itself as a thing not to be considered sinful, but rather extremely virtuous and indicative of uprightness. And so idolatry ever does. While before God it is the worst abomination, before the world its appearance and reputation are superior. So far from being recognized as sin, it is considered supreme holiness and divine worship. The very worship of Mammon wears an imposing mask. It must not be called covetousness or dishonest striving after property, but must be known as upright, legitimate endeavor to obtain a livelihood, a seeking to acquire property honestly. It ingeniously clothes itself with the Word of God, saying God commands man to seek his bread by labor, by his own exertions, and that every man is bound to provide for his own household. No civil government, no, nor a preacher even, can censure covetousness under that guise unless it be betrayed in gross robbing and stealing.

19. Let every man know that his covetousness will be laid to the charge of his own conscience, that he will have to answer for it, for God will not be deceived. It is evident the vice is gaining ground. With its false appearance and ostentation, and its world-wide prevalence, it is commonly accepted as legal. Without censure or restraint, men are engrossed in coveting and accumulating to the utmost. Those having position and power think they have the right to acquire by violence as much as they can, daily making assessments and imposts, and new oppressions and impositions upon the poor. And the common rabble seek gain by raising prices, by extortion, fraud, and so on. Yet all desire not to be charged with wrong-doing; they would not they should be called unchristian on account of their conduct. Indeed, such excess of covetousness obtains that the public robbing and stealing, and the faithlessness and fraud, of the meanest hirelings, servants and maids everywhere can no longer be restrained.

20. But who would care to recount the full extent of this vice in all dealings and interests of the world between man and man? Enough has been said to induce every one who aims to be a Christian to examine his own heart and, if he find himself guilty of such vice, to refrain; if not, to know how to guard against it. Every individual can readily perceive for himself what is consistent with Christian character in this respect, what can be allowed with a good conscience; for he has Christ's rule of dealing as we would be dealt with, which insures equality and justice. Where unfairness exists, covetousness must obtain to some extent.

21. If you will not desist from the vice of covetousness, then know you are not a Christian, not a believer, but, as Paul calls you, a base, detestable idolater, having no part in God's kingdom; for you are living wholly to the world and without intent to rise with Christ. You will receive no blessing from the joy-inspiring and gracious revelation that Christ died and rose for sinners. You cannot say, "Therefore he died for me, I trust." Truly, Christ died for you, but if you continue in your wickedness, using this revelation as a cloak for your mean covetousness, do not - such is the declaration of the text - by any means apply that comforting promise to yourself. Although Christ indeed died and rose for all, yet unto you he is not risen; you have not apprehended his resurrection by faith. You have seen the smoke but have not felt the fire; you have heard the words but have received nothing of their power.

THE NEW LIFE IN CHRIST.

22. If you would be able honestly to boast of this revelation as unto you, if you would have the comfort of knowing that Christ, through his death and resurrection, has blessed you, you must not continue in your old sinful life, but put on a new character. For Christ died and rose for the very purpose of effecting your eventual death with him and your participation in his resurrection: in other words, he died that you might be made a new man, beginning even now, a man like unto himself in heaven, a man having no covetous desire or ambition for advantage over a neighbor, a man satisfied with what God grants him as the result of his labor, and kind and beneficent to the needy.

23. In his desire to arouse Christians to the necessity of guarding against such vices as he mentions, Paul strengthens his admonition, in conclusion, by grave threats and visions of divine wrath, saying, "for which things' sake cometh the wrath of God upon the sons of disobedience"; that is, upon the unbelieving world, which regards not the Word of God, does not fear or believe in it nor strive to obey it, and yet is unwilling to be charged with idolatry and other unchristian principles, desiring rather to be considered righteous and God's own people. In the last quoted clause Paul also implies that worldly conduct, the life of worldly lusts such as covetousness and other vices, is inconsistent and impossible with faith, and that the power of Christ's resurrection cannot reach it. For this reason he terms them "sons of disobedience," who have not faith and who, by their unchristian conduct, bring God's wrath upon themselves and are cast out from the kingdom of God. God seriously passes sentence against such conduct, declaring he will reveal his wrath against it in bodily punishment in this world and eternal punishment in the world hereafter. Elsewhere Paul says practically the same thing (Eph 5, 6): "*For because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the sons of disobedience.*" See also Rom 1, 18.

24. Such is the admonition of Paul unto all who would be called Christians. He reminds them whereunto the Gospel of Christ calls them and what his resurrection should work in them - death to all life and doctrine not in harmony with God's Word and God's will - and that if they believe in the risen and living Christ, they, as risen with him, should seek after the same heavenly life where he sits at the right hand of God, a life where is no sin nor worldly error, but eternal life and imperishable treasures to be possessed and enjoyed with Christ forever.

25. But the revelation of Christ's resurrection can be apprehended by nothing but faith. The things Paul here tells us of life and glory for Christians in the risen Christ are not apparent to the world; in fact, Christians themselves do not perceive them by external sense. Notice, he says, "Ye died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." The world does not understand the Christian life and has no word of praise for it; it is hostile to the faith and cannot tolerate the fact that you believe in Christ and refuse to join hands with it in love for worldly lusts. A hidden life indeed is the Christian's; not only hidden to the world, but, so far as external perception goes, to the Christian himself. Nevertheless, it is a life sure and in safe keeping,

and in the hereafter its glory shall be manifest to all the world. For Paul says: *"When Christ, who is our life, shall be manifested, then shall ye also with him be manifested in glory."*

26. Here is comfort for Christians in this earthly life where, though they receive the doctrine of Christ and apprehend him by faith, their resurrection seems to the world and to their own perceptions untrue; where they must contend with sin and infirmities and moreover are subject to much affliction and adversity; and where consequently they are extremely sensible of death and terror when they would experience joy and life. In this verse Paul comforts them, showing them where to seek and surely apprehend their life.

27. Be of good cheer, he would say, for ye are dead to the worldly life. This life ye must renounce, but in so doing ye make a precious exchange. Dying unto the world is a blessed experience, for which ye will obtain a life far more glorious. Ye are now, through Christ's death, redeemed from sin and from death eternal and are made imperishable. Upon you is conferred everlasting glory. But this risen life ye cannot yet perceive in yourselves; ye have it in Christ, through faith. Christ is spoken of as "our life." Though the life is still unrevealed to you, it is certain, insured to you beyond the power of any to deprive you of it. By faith in Christ's life, then, are ye to be preserved and to obtain victory over the terrors and torments of sin, death and the devil, until that life shall be revealed in you and made manifest to men. In Christ ye surely possess eternal life. Nothing is lacking to a perfect realization except that the veil whereby it is hidden so long as we are in mortal flesh and blood, is yet to be removed. Then will eternal life be revealed. Then all worldly, terrestrial things, all sin and death, will be abolished. In every Christian shall be manifest only glory. Christians, then, believing in Christ, and knowing him risen, should comfort themselves with the expectation of living with him in eternal glory; the inevitable condition is that they have first, in the world, died with him.

28. Paul does not forget to recognize the earthly environment of Christians and saints, for he says: "Put to death therefore your members which are upon the earth." Though acknowledging Christians dead with Christ unto worldly things and possessing life in Christ, he yet tells them to mortify their members on earth, and enumerates the sins of fornication, covetousness, etc. This is truly a strange idea, that it should be necessary for men who have died and risen with Christ and hence have been made really holy, to mortify worldly inclinations in their bodily members. The apostle refers to this subject in Romans 7: 5, 8, 23, and elsewhere, frequently explaining how, in the saints, there continue to remain various lusts of original sin, which constantly rise in the effort to break out, even gross external vices. These have to be resisted. They are strong enough utterly to enslave a man, to subject him to the deepest guilt, as Paul complains (Rom 7, 23); and they will surely do it unless the individual, by faith and the aid of the Holy Spirit, oppose and conquer them.

29. Therefore, saints must, by a vigorous and unceasing warfare, subdue their sinful lusts if they would not lose God's grace and their faith. Paul says in Romans 8, 13: "If ye live after the flesh, ye must die; but if by the Spirit ye put to death the deeds of the body, ye shall

live.” In order, then, to retain the Spirit and the incipient divine life, the Christian must contend against himself. This cannot be accomplished by the monastic hypocrisies wherewith some expect to resist sin. For the pollution of sin is not merely something adhering to the clothing, or to the skin externally, and easily washed off. It is not something to be discharged from the body by fasting and castigation. No, it penetrates the flesh and blood and is diffused rough the whole man. Positive mortification is necessary or it will destroy one. And this is how to mortify sin: It must be perceived with serious displeasure and repented of; and through faith Christ's forgiveness must be sought and found. Thus shall sinful inclinations be resisted, defeated and restrained from triumphing over you. More has been said on this topic elsewhere.

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