

## **Is Religion Only a Habit? The Victorious Power of Faith.**

Text: 1 John 1:5 - 2:2

Suggested Hymns:

504, 356, 336, 305, 327

1) Walks in the light of the Gospel

2) Is engaged in a struggle against sin

3) Obtains the treasures of salvation

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 1 John 1:5-2:2, *<sup>5</sup> This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup> If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.*

*<sup>7</sup> But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. <sup>8</sup> If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup> If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.*

*<sup>1</sup> My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. <sup>2</sup> And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world. (NKJV)*

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

Dear friends in Christ,

In last Sunday's sermon it was pointed out that the Christian's faith does not take holidays but that it continually moves the person to regular church attendance, to steadfastness in godly virtues, and to perseverance in the service of Christ and His Church.

Where a Christian has therefore been for some time under the influence of God's Holy Spirit through the Word, the exercise of many Christian practises and virtues becomes a habit with him. Good and praiseworthy is such a habit indeed.

The Christian is truly blessed who does not need, every Sunday morning, with much deliberation and with many arguments for and against come to a decision whether he is going to church or not, but who from sheer habit is in his seat for every Worship Service.

Again, the Christian avoids serious problems and difficulties when he no longer needs to debate within himself whether honesty is the best policy, but rather has come to the settled conviction that honesty is his only policy.

Finally, the Christian who gets the most joy and satisfaction from his church-membership is the one who no longer needs to ask whether the church is worthy of his support, but to whom the church is as natural a part of his life as are food and drink.

But praiseworthy and even necessary as it is that Christians acquire many good habits which are in harmony with their profession of faith, their faith dare never degenerate into a mere habit.

Just as their faith does not take any holidays but is always a living, moving, and active force, so, too, their faith can never be a mere habit. Rather it is a divine power, which produces conscious effects and results. Let us today consider the victorious power of faith. May the Lord bless our meditation.

### **1. The Victorious Power Of Faith Walks In The Light Of The Gospel**

St. John wrote these inspired words to the congregations in Asia Minor. Some of these congregations had been founded by the Apostle Paul some twenty-five to thirty years before. They were therefore well-established congregations, and most of the members had undoubtedly become accustomed to many practises and virtues of the Christian life.

But these very habits of long standing were a threat to the spiritual life and progress of these church-members. They were in danger of mistaking external practise for the life of faith and outward conformity with the church for true spiritual union with God and Christ.

They saw so much of the Christians' external life, that they were in danger of forgetting that life which *"is hidden with Christ in God."*<sup>1</sup>

Against this danger the apostle issues a ringing warning. Faith is not an external mechanical habit, but a life of power. It walks in the light of the Gospel as our text says in verses 5-7.

What the apostles received from the Lord Jesus and then conveyed to the Christians was not a set of regulations, not a list of habits to be formed, but a message of information *“that God is Light and in Him is no darkness at all.”* Light is a symbol of purity, of holiness, of hope, and of life. We read in John 8:12, <sup>12</sup> *Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.”*<sup>2</sup>

God is completely light, so that there is no darkness whatever with Him. His purity is so complete that even the thought of impurity is foreign to Him. His holiness is so perfect that sin is an abomination to Him. His promises are so great and so manifold that He is always the source of abundant hope.

God is Life and the Source of all life, so that death is banished from His presence. All this light God brings to people in His holy Word and offers to us by Christ through the Gospel.

Now, what happens if a person’s religion degenerates into a mere habit? He may indeed say that he has fellowship with God and with the light of the Gospel. He may feel that he can prove this by pointing to his so-called Christian habits. But in reality he is not walking in the light at all.

God’s purity does not remind him of his own impurity. God’s holiness does not convince him of his own sinfulness. He does not build upon and trust in God’s promises, because actually they mean nothing to him. Even life, eternal life, is a very vague thing to him, since he is altogether engrossed in this present life and has neither time nor inclination to look beyond it.

When thus a person’s religion is a mere habit, he is living a lie. He may indeed go through the motions which true faith produces, but the power, the life, the vital activity of faith, he lacks. He is like a deaf and blind man, who has indeed learned to stay on the footpath, but who is unaware of the dangers which surround him and who is insensible to the joy, the beauty, and the life which is about him on every side.

How different it is where faith walks in the light of the Gospel! Our text says, <sup>7</sup> *But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.* When a person's religion is not a mere habit, when he walks in the light of the Gospel, he does not blindly, almost unconsciously, go through a set of performances, but he is awake, alert, alive with the power of faith, and knows what it is all about.

He sees life in this world as it truly is, a life soiled and sordid, woefully out of harmony with the purity of God. He is painfully conscious of the power, the penalty, and the reproach of sin. He appreciates the fellowship of like-minded Christians, who deplore the evils of this life and refuse to be muddled in the follies of this world.

Together with his fellow-Christians, he looks up into the light of God's promises, and despite faults and failings, despite reverses and sorrows, he holds to the sure hope that God, according to His promise, will *do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us.*<sup>3</sup> And of all this the Christian is fully persuaded because the very center of the Gospel is this fact, that *the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

Because this is the very breath and pulse of faith, that it rests totally and completely upon the merits of Christ's suffering and death, true and real faith can never be a mere habit but must walk in the light of the Gospel. It must stand in awe of God's purity and holiness, build on the faithful promises of God, and rejoice in the atoning blood of Jesus, the forgiveness of his sins.

This is expressed in Galatians 2:20, <sup>20</sup> *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."*

## **2. The Victorious Power Of Faith Is Engaged In A Struggle Against Sin**

Another danger which threatens the Christian whose faith is degenerating into a mere habit is that he loses sight of his own sins and transgressions.

Because of the habits which he has formed by his association with the Gospel and the Church, his life may indeed be free from gross sins and flagrant transgressions. Before the eyes of others his life may even be exemplary. Thus it may come about that he is no longer conscious of any sins, and that even the lust of the heart is no longer recognised as sin.

If that is the case then that person needs the Law as we read in Romans 7:7, ... *I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet."*

Because of his so-called Christian habits he may share the opinion of the rich young ruler and say that he has kept all the commandments.<sup>4</sup> He may develop the attitude of the Pharisee who thanked God that he was not as other men are.<sup>5</sup> Where religion is a mere habit, there is no longer a struggle against sin.

This very danger must have threatened also those Christians to whom John was writing, because he issues a stern warning against it in verse 8, <sup>8</sup> *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* When a person loses sight of his own sins and transgressions, when he is so bold to say that he has no sin, he deceives nobody but himself. His fellow-men, and especially his fellow-Christians, will have no difficulty in finding many sins and transgressions in his life.

But he is, with his self-righteous attitude, not only contradicting and denying the age-old experiences and the common knowledge of mankind, but what is much worse, he is in glaring contradiction and open rebellion against God. <sup>10</sup> *If we say that we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and His word is not in us.*

We also read in Romans 1:18 that *the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.* The Word of God has issued a blanket indictment of sin against all people.<sup>6</sup>

What a vain, what a damnable attitude, then, for a church-member haughtily and self-righteously to claim perfection, when by that very claim he makes God a liar and repudiates the very Word of God which he claims he is honouring and keeping.

But if a person's faith is in truth a vital, active force, and walks in the light of the Gospel, there will be no denial of sin, but a constant struggle against sin. The significance of his baptism will not be lightly forgotten. The Old Adam, will by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

But this will never be done by denying one's own sins and transgressions but only by recognising them. We cannot struggle against an evil that we do not know. We cannot conquer sins of whose existence we are totally unaware. A faith, however, which walks in the light of God's Word is keenly conscious not only of sinful deeds and words but also of sinful thoughts and desires.

And whatever is recognised as sin is also humbly acknowledged and confessed as sin. These sins and transgressions cannot be gotten rid of, cannot be banished, except by the grace of God, who daily and richly forgives all sins for Christ's sake through the Gospel. Therefore <sup>9</sup> *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

Thus where religion is not a mere habit but a living faith, the Christian lives in daily contrition and repentance. He begins each day with the determination that sin, though abounding in the world, shall have no dominion over him.

He humbly prays each morning that his heavenly Father would keep him this day from sin and every evil, that all his doings and life may please Him. Then in the evening, as the Christian reviews the events of the day, he makes humble confession of the sins and shortcomings which have that day marred his life and conduct.

He prays that his gracious God would for Jesus' sake forgive him all his sins where he has done wrong in word and deed, in thought and desire. Thus the true Christian's struggle against sin is carried on daily, and his faith builds on God's promise, which says, as we heard before, <sup>9</sup> *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

### **3. The Victorious Power Of Faith Obtains The Treasures Of Salvation**

All this, true faith does and accomplishes not merely as an end in itself but to obtain the treasures of salvation. On this point the apostle writes with friendliness but with seriousness which the subject and the circumstances demand.

John had grown old among the people to whom he was addressing these words. He was painfully aware of the dangers which threatened these Christians. They were in danger of becoming engrossed again in the things of this life, while their faith withered and died and left nothing but external habits.

Hence he writes in 1 John 2:1-2, *<sup>1</sup> My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. <sup>2</sup> And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.*

While these Christians were making their faith and their Christianity their boast, they were in danger of committing the most grievous sin, the sin of neglecting such great salvation,<sup>7</sup> which had been purchased not with silver and gold but with the precious blood of Christ, as a Lamb without blemish and without spot.<sup>8</sup>

Let us then be on our guard lest we commit this most grievous sin, the sin of neglecting our salvation. And if we find that our religion has indeed degenerated into a mere habit, that it lacks vigour and life, let us heartily repent of our coldness, our carelessness, and our neglect.

Yet even though we have become guilty of such neglect and have sinned, *we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. <sup>2</sup> And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.*

The fact that Jesus is the Propitiation for the sins of the whole world should arouse in the heart of every person the faith, the hope, the confidence, that Jesus pleads also for the forgiveness of His people's negligence before the Throne of Grace, and that God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Then when faith apprehends these treasures of salvation and lays hold on eternal life, then it is no mere external habit but a living power which moves us to walk in the light of the Gospel, and to engage in the daily struggle against sin.

Such a faith has and enjoys the treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.<sup>9</sup> Amen.

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

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 3:3

<sup>2</sup> See also John 1:9; 12:35, 36; also Isa. 6:5.

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 3:20-21

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 19:15-22

<sup>5</sup> Luke 18:11

<sup>6</sup> Gal. 3:22; Rom. 3:9, 19,23; 11:32; Prov. 20:9; Eccl. 7:20

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 2:3

<sup>8</sup> 1 Pet. 1:18, 19

<sup>9</sup> Matt. 6:20