

Clothed in His Righteousness Alone

1 Peter 1:17-23

A sermon for the Second Sunday after Easter

Last week we looked at Doubting Thomas and learned that everyone is a second generation disciple. There is no advantage to anyone who was there who saw him, touched him, and heard him because this was all God's choosing and electing, giving them faith, not a super miracle or super proof. Rather, we are all those to whom God gives faith, and we are called to be witnesses and not philosophers who have some kind of proof.

The Epistle text begins: "And if you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile" (1 Peter 1:17). It says we are judged according to our deeds and we should live accordingly. This verse is simple and plain.

There has been throughout the history of the church the assertion that because we are those who do what we are supposed to do, we have been successful, we have conquered, and we have become large in number, and we have changed the world.

Is this the case anymore? It is very likely that the number of Muslims will soon be greater than the number of Christians (which is approximately two billion). What does that say about truth and success? We can no longer say that because we the ones who are true and right, we are the largest and we are succeeding in the world.

If we go back into church history, we find out that that is the way it has been. If we look at the map of the western world in the year 600 A.D., the size of the Christian world was more or less the same as the size of the Roman Empire. But 150 years later all of North Africa and all of Spain had fallen to Islam.

If you talk about Holy Russia (which was converted to Christianity in the Eighth Century), notice what happened. It all fell. A small fraction lives as Christian in Russia today. Somebody has coined for Europe a new term called Eurabia because the number of people that go to church in Europe, across the board, is about 2 - 3%. The birth rate among Europeans is so low, the number of Muslims will soon exceed the number who are Western Europeans.

Canada is now not only not Christian but is becoming non-religious. If we look across history, we see that Christianity has been in India almost 1,500 years. The number of Christians is about 1%.

If we look at Japan where Western civilization has been in full force for 150 years, the number of Christians is about 1%.

In Latin America the spread of Christianity occurred along with the expansion we call colonialism. In Latin America there is a mixture of the old native religions and Christianity.

We have been in China for 150 years. The church is increasing as it is in Africa, but we will have to see if it's cultural Christianity or real Christianity. After all, so much of what we are describing is a way of saying our old way of culture is gone, and we are going to join this new technical age, but it may not be really Christian.

There is Christian writer named Lee Strobel who writes: "We're right, we've triumphed." But the problem with books like Strobel's is that they do not encounter anybody from the other side; it is a kind of mutual back-slapping without asking what kind of possible objections there are.

We recall the Scottish poet Robert Burns who famously wrote (translation): "O would some Power give us the gift to see ourselves as others see us."

When we look at history closely, it looks a bit different. Hospitals started in India way before Christianity. Toleration is not a result of Christian but rather counter-Christian developments, saying: A plague on both your houses. Modern technology may or may not be tied to Christianity. Capitalism may or may not be tied to Protestant developments.

Someone has said that we have become a fad-driven church. We jump on each bandwagon as it comes along, and when it is over, we tumble off. There are huge numbers of books and TV evangelists out there who attract thousands of followers. We think: If they attract so many, they must be right.

Think of all the popular movements in the last few years: The Promise Keepers, the Left Behind series, and the Prayer of Jabez, the Purpose Driven Life movement. That movement has come and gone even though approximately 46 million copies of Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, were sold in hardback.

There are also fads which have stayed: The church growth movement and the charismatic movement have continued. The same sort of thing has often happened in church history: Pelagianism, Arianism, Gnosticism continue today under other names and forms. Does that mean that they are what Christianity is about? Of course not. The program of The Promise Keepers was a subtle legalism. The Prayer of Jabez was a prayer that does not mention Christ. The Purpose Driven Life is about receiving rewards from God for obeying him in certain ways. All these movements remind us of what William Inge (1860-1954) said: "He who marries the spirit of the age will find himself a widower in the next."

What about individuals? Some say: "You can see Christianity is true because of what it does; it changes lives." Your life is to be transformed and that's the way you show you're a Christian. We call it conversion. But, of course, there's conversion in other religions, and even non-religious conversions in which people turn their lives around for the better. There are therapeutic programs like AA. And there are some who do better and then regress. For example, Peter. Paul writes in Galatians 2:11-14 that he had to say to Peter: "You have betrayed the truth of the Gospel." Peter's life was not one continuous, glowing triumph at all.

Another good example is Luther. His superior Johannes von Staupitz told him: "If you will just do these things that I tell you, you'll find real peace." Luther, whose main genius was that he was honest and could not lie to himself, knew that he had all kinds of sins and that whatever he did was ego-driven, trying to secure his salvation. Heiko Oberman sums up the difference between Staupitz and Luther. Both spoke of the Christian life as a "joyful exchange" between Christ and the believer. But Staupitz said that, freed from the burden of sin, believers will find perceptible peace, peace that can be experienced. But for Luther "the joyful exchange . . . does not lead to the sweet experience of peace." Rather, "in the battle with the Devil there is no rest, no peace, and no visible success" (Oberman, *Luther. Man Between God and the Devil*, 184).

The same is true for the great saints. We ordinarily look at them from the outside, but when we read their autobiographies, we find that their inner lives were full of turmoil and falling away from the Lord.

Most of us live with an eye to "keeping up with the Joneses." Whatever the Joneses happen to be in our context, and that goes for what is Christian, too. C.S. Lewis in the *Screwtape Letters* shows how the devil sneaks in to fool us. Even if we try to go the way Paul does in 2 Cor 12: "My power is made perfect in weakness," or as it says

in 1 Timothy 1:16: "I am the greatest of sinners," these are all ways that the evil one gets us to be centered on ourselves (not that this is what these texts mean, but it is a way they can be twisted).

We return to 1 Peter 1:17: "If you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his deeds," then what? We are judged and rewarded by our works?

As Luther says of "the joyful exchange": In this life in the battle with the devil there is no rest, no peace, and no visible success. Of course there is peace, but it's not about feelings of peace but the peace of John 14:27: "My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you." And visible success? No, we live "by faith alone."

Some say that in heaven there will be rewards according to works and degrees of heaven. But in the parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 21: 16, we recall how some worked all day and some worked just an hour at the end of the day. The rewards were the same.

Or: Luke 6:38, where it says: "[G]ood measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap."

Or: Eph 3:20: "Now to him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all we ask or think" (KJV).

Or: 1 Cor 2:9: ". . . eye has not seen, nor ear hear, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him."

The idea that there are ways that we discern degrees in heaven is simply false. And this verse taken by itself, 1 Peter 1:17, is false. There is a verse following.

In order to make it clear in the context, there really should be a "but" at the beginning of verse 18, so it would read like this: ¹⁷ . . . the Lord judges each one impartially according to their deeds . . . ¹⁸ **But** you know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, that like a lamb without blemish or spot." And then in 1 Peter 1:21: "Through him you have confidence in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God."

That helps us sort out this whole matter. As Paul writes in 2 Cor 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the holiness of God."

That means that he has taken our sin, and we have received his holiness. He has done it. "It is finished" (John 19:30). As the hymn "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less" states: We are "clothed in his righteousness alone." It is not a matter of ideas we have about rewards. As Paul writes in Gal 6:14: "Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." Amen