

Opening of Seminary, Tues., Sept. 16, 1958

1098

Prayer:

Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who through the willing obedience, suffering and death of Thine only begotten Son hast reconciled us to Thee, and hast committed to our hands the ministry of that word of reconciliation, grant us grace by Thy Spirit ever to treasure this word as our greatest gift. And as our special petition for these young men who now are to prepare themselves for the work of that ministry: May they all truthfully be able to say, as did the repentant and humbled Peter of old: "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee." We ask it in His Saviour name to whom that confession was made on the shores of Tiberias long centuries ago. Amen.

Text: John 21, 17-19.

Fellow redeemed, and especially you young men who either are entering upon or continuing in the study of sacred theology, grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"It was the way the Master went -
Shall not His servant tread it still?"

Thus we have learned to sing in one of our treasured hymns. And it is a question we should constantly ask ourselves. For it is as true today as it was on the day our Saviour was tempted in the wilderness: The devil quoted Scripture all right, but left out some very significant words of that 91st Psalm, namely: "In all thy ways." Our heavenly Father has promised to be with us, lest we dash our foot against a stone, but only when we are found in His ways.

For the sake of those of you who are beginning your formal theological training it is well that you from the very start bear certain basic principles in mind. Among them will be this: Will my behaviour be such that it will not give offence to my fellow believers? What will be the nature of my work as a shepherd of the flock? Is it work at which the world at large will marvel, and for which it will give due credit at once? Or is it perhaps something which will have to wait for a more just evaluation? The answer to that last question will be found in the 11th chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, where, in the midst of an enumeration of what the saints of God had to bear, we are told (and that by way of a parenthesis): "Of whom the world was not worthy." Heb. 11, 18.

Let this be said at once: "If you have not patience to wait for God's appointed time when looking for results, you had better step out of line - the sooner the better." For when the prophet Isaiah tells us: "He that believeth shall not make haste," Isa. 28, 16, it includes also this matter of waiting patiently for God's particular "afterward." That adverb has a most significant meaning in Scripture: "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless AFTERWARD it yieldeth the

1098

peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby." Heb. 12, 11. And so we shall today, on the basis of our text, center our attention on:

"WHAT CHRIST'S 'FOLLOW ME' IMPLIES."

According to our text it implies three things:

1. A love for Christ which treasures His word even when it rebukes.
2. A love for Christ which wills only what God wills.
3. A love for Christ which will glorify God by what we are ready to suffer for Christ's sake.

1. Even when it rebukes us. It used to trouble me no end when in my younger days I ran across that Bible passage which says: "He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me." John 14, 21. I wanted to have the assurance that I truly loved my Saviour, but had I kept His commandments? If the keeping of His commandments would imply that I had never violated them, then certainly my love of Him would fall short of the mark. Had that been the meaning of keeping His commandments, Peter would never have dared speak as he does in this morning's text. But what is its meaning? There is a "keeping" which implies that I treasure it even when it reveals my sins and rebukes me. And that is the meaning of that Greek word TEREIN here, as in so many other passages in Holy Writ.

When Peter appeals to Christ's omniscience ("Lord, thou knowest all things"), he means that in dead seriousness. It is as though the thoroughly humbled fisherman had said: "The real Peter, the Peter I want to be in my inmost heart, that Peter loved you even in that shameful hour when he in the courtyard of Caiaphas cursed and swore that he did not know you." What was it then which was lacking? It was the unwavering courage to back up with his tongue what his trembling heart told him was true. For God has taught us: "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." Rom. 10, 9. In that awful hour Peter was more concerned about saving his physical life than in having a part in the life which shall never end. The old Adam in him did not have courage to stand up for the truth, and as a consequence he fell. Had he realized in that chilly morning hour that we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth, he would have been spared that shameful fall. Here we have an instance of what Paul discusses in that self-revealing 7th chapter of Romans: "It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me." Rom. 7, 17.

And Peter's whole life as a follower of Christ is an exemplification of this very principle. Did the well-meaning, but sorely blundering, Peter leave his Master that day up in Galilee when Christ had to call him a Satan? No, he humbled himself under the mighty hand of God, and was in due time exalted. It looked rather ominous that day in Capernaum following the feeding of the 5000 in the wilderness, when the vast majority who had seen that miracle turned their backs on Christ, saying: "This is an hard saying: who can hear it?" Joh. 6, 60. But when on that day Peter was faced with the alternative of going with the crowd or casting his lot with the lowly Nazarene - he didn't for a moment hesitate, but immediately stammered forth: "Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art Christ, the Son of the living God." Joh. 6, 68,69. Did Peter resent the rebuke which his fellow apostle Paul had to administer to him down in Antioch because Peter had dissembled, refusing to eat with the Gentiles? No, he promptly bows to the power of the divine word which rebukes him.

If you are to follow Christ as His undershepherds, you will have to take an attitude toward the word which the world at large will consider superstition. "The word verbally inspired? Ridiculous!" says the scoffing world. But the word of God claims for itself that very earmark. "All scripture is given by the inspiration of God," says Paul in the last epistle we have from his pen. 2 Tim. 3, 16. (Yes, I know how certain sticklers will object that this was spoken concerning the Old Testament then extant. But we have testimony aplenty to show that Paul would have it applied to all which was written by "holy men of God." Cf. 1 Cor. 2, 13.) "No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost," says Peter. 2 Pet. 1, 20,21. And our souls' Redeemer puts His stamp of approval on verbal inspiration when He speaks as He does in John 10, 35. He has just quoted a passage from the 82nd Psalm, where the heavenly Father speaks of civil judges as Gods because they stand in His stead here on earth, and then Christ immediately adds: "And scripture cannot be broken." As followers of the Lamb, then, your confession will ever have to be:

"God's Word a treasure is to me,
Through sorrow's night my son shall be,
The shield of faith in battle;
The Father's hand hath written there
My title as His child and heir:
'The kingdom's thine forever,'
That promise faileth never."

2. A love which wills only what God wills. That will mean that you will have to say as did your Saviour in Gethsemane's darkest hour: "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." Matt. 26, 39. But it is right here where you are going to have one of the most troublesome cruxes in your ministry. First of all you are going to have it as your own personal problem - the matter of decision, was that yours or was it God's? That's the age-old question which is just as vital today as it was when Luther had to fight it out with the learned Erasmus Rotterdamus, and which has been preserved to us in Luther's masterly book: "De Servo Arbitrio," i.e., "Concerning the Bondage of the Will." Erasmus insisted that the natural man had by nature a free will. And that is, of course, what the world wants to be told. That it is master of its own fate, when, as a matter of fact, it is but a helpless lost lamb in the wilderness surrounded by ravening wolves. Rightly does Luther answer Erasmus: "Der freie Wille sei nichts."

To illustrate, let us relate an incident which took place some thirty years ago in Watford City, N. Dak. At a circuit meeting we were conducting there in the town hall a number of so-called lay preachers came to the meeting. And they were not a little disturbed when they were told that the natural man had no such a thing as a free will. After I had spoken for a while I was interrupted by one who asked: "But does not Scripture say: 'Awake thou that sleepest'? does it not say: 'Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden'? Does it not say: 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved'? And who is it that is to awake, to come, to believe, isn't it I?" What was there to answer to this? My answer was then, and it is the same to this day: "You seem to think that the Gospel of Christ is merely an invitation, but it is more, it is also transportation. What does Paul say in that crucial 1st chapter of Romans? 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek' " Rom. 1, 16. What does Paul tell the Philippians? "It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Phil. 2, 13. Make certain that Clausen's classic stanza is not forgotten in your congregation:

"All our knowledge, sense, and sight
 Lie in deepest darkness shrouded,
 Till Thy Spirit breaks our night
 With the beams of truth unclouded.
 Thou alone to God canst win us,
 Thou must work all good within us."

Now Scripture does not tell us exactly how Peter died. But it does tell us that he was to honour God with a martyr's death. He was to be bound up and led by another.

And who was that other? The Spirit of God, of course, who alone can make of our unwilling hearts willing hearts, as we confess in the 11th article of our Formula of Concord. We do not seek to solve the mystery of why one who hears the Gospel believes it, remains in it, and is saved, while another who hears the same message rejects it and is lost. But we do know that the new man in us would not feel right unless what is of flesh and blood had been overcome, and that he was made to do that which the natural man did not want to do. Your confession then, as undershepherds, will ever have to be:

"Lord, Thy words are waters living
Where I quench my thirsty need;
Lord, Thy words are bread life-giving,
On Thy words my soul doth feed.
Lord, Thy word shall be my light
Through death's vale and dreary night;
Yea, Thy word my sword prevailing
And my cup of joy unfailling."

3. A love which will glorify God in what it is ready to suffer for Christ's sake. "Suffer for Christ's sake?" you ask. Exactly that! There simply is no such thing as a Christianity which can enjoy Christ without suffering with him. Of course the world, whose religion, if it professes any religion at all, is one of accommodation, will want Pullman service to the New Jerusalem. But they will not be with the saints who will be singing the new song before the throne: "Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation." Rev. 5, 9. The idea of being crucified with Christ did not appeal to them.

"But haven't times changed?" someone will ask. The way to heaven is just as difficult today as it was on the day that our Saviour spoke these sobering words: "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." Matt. 11, 12. You simply can't sleep your way into heaven. The Bible doesn't encourage the indifferent to go on in their daydreams. It tells us today with just as much seriousness as was in Isaiah's proclamation: "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near." Isa. 55, 6. That adverbial "while" warns you that there is a time coming when it will be too late to seek the Lord or to call upon Him. There is not a single statement in all of Holy Writ which would encourage you to put off until tomorrow what can and should be done today. "To day if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness." Heb. 3, 7.8 & Ps. 95, 7.

For God's sake, do not let your hearers be lulled into sleep with soporific preaching, which has not the ring of doom in it for those who want to feel at ease in their pet sins. No, let there be the seriousness of eternity about your preaching. The warning voice of a Johann Heermann's hymn of repentance must never be silenced:

"O trifle not the time away!
Say not, 'I'll come another day.'
Say not, 'I'll have my soul's desire,
And turn when of the world I tire.'
Say not, 'I'll then converted be,
God will be merciful to me.'

"'Tis true that God is rich in grace,-
Beholding His Anointed's Face.
The blood of Christ atoned for sin,
He died eternal life to win;
Yet God doth not vouchsafe to say
That thou shalt live another day.

"O hasten, sinner, to be wise!
Nor dare God's message to despise.
He who this hour supplies thy breath,
The next, may give thee o'er to death.
And if thy sins are not forgiven,
Thou'lt never, never, enter heaven."

But just because you have preached God's irrevocable law in all its damning enormity, there will be real meaning to that Gospel word which answers the question of the ages: "What must I do to be saved?" Do to be saved? - Why, it has been done, the battle is at an end, the victory is ours in that blessed name which is above every name. And so your personal confession as an ambassador for Christ, even under the most trying circumstances, must ever be:

"Jesus, I my cross have taken,
All to leave and follow Thee;
Destitute, despised, forsaken,
Thou from hence my all shalt be.
Perish every fond ambition,
All I've sought or hoped or known;
Yet how rich is my condition!
God and heaven are still mine own."

Amen.

N. A. Madson, Sr.