

Philippians 3:1-16  
I Corinthians 9:24-27

## PRACTICING YOUR RELIGION

In these passages from Philippians and First Corinthians, Paul reminds us of the consistency, the constancy, the strenuousness with which the Christian pursues the goal of Life in Christ Jesus. On the one hand, it is clear that Paul wants this Life more than anything else he can envision or imagine. Nobody is standing over him with a whip. No guilty voice of conscience from his parents or his early upbringing is nagging at him. Whatever is left of such voices is urging him to return to the Pharisaism from which he came. In any case, it is clear that Paul has turned to this new WAY of Life because it appeals to him. It draws him in spite of all the mayhem and trouble and sacrifices that it has and will continue to cost him.

At the same time, Paul is aware that this new WAY of Life he is onto requires constant effort and concentration and discipline. He knows, even after all his years and experience with it, that the Christian Life does not come naturally to him. He does not quite have the full knack of it even yet. It keeps eluding him, or requiring something else he had not expected. There is no way to “store it up” or get good enough at it today so that tomorrow will be automatic. The challenge to grow and change and keep learning is always there. And so Paul likens it to running a race or to a strenuous journey.

It seems to me that this is not only true for Paul but for all Christians, for all time. We *want* the Christian Life, yet we find it terribly demanding. We love it, yet we get weary of its requirements. We would not part with it for the world, yet we sure would not mind parting with it for a couple of days here and there.

Without the Lord Christ, our souls would be so lonely and lost that the sheer contemplation of it is enormously painful. At the same time, we get sick of all the demands, tired of the commitment and discipline that go with it, and rebellious at the mention of any new challenge or opportunity. And of course, we do not feel one way one day and another way the next day. We feel *both* ways at the same time. We would like to throw it all off and we would like to get much deeper into it – at the same time. Both urges war within us. As you know, up until we were nicknamed “Christians” as a term of derision, we were simply called “followers of THE WAY.” This WAY, this Christian journey, this spiritual path – practicing our religion – feels like a “going home.” It also feels like a great strangeness. It is the

soul's deepest longing, but it is also unnatural (not consistent with our nature). It is a paradox, as we ourselves are paradoxical – caught halfway between animal and angel: *“In but not of this world”* – somewhere between the Light Bearer and the Anointed; between the Accuser and the Crucified; between the Serpent and the Lamb; between Satan and Christ. That is our place and condition. That is “where” we are.

Satan urges us to be impatient, but Satan is patient. (In Luke 4, he departs until an opportune time.) Evil is patient. It is ever waiting for us. If you live for seventy-one years as a model citizen, husband, father, friend, and worker and then, in the seventy-second year, all the anger you have been stowing away while you concentrated on doing good suddenly rises up in outrage and you kill somebody – what do they call you? Loving father? Good citizen? No, you are a murderer.

Evil is never out of the picture. Evil is never overcome “once and for all.” Every day and many times throughout each day, we decide to side with good or evil – to live for ourselves or for Satan or for Christ. We cannot decide for tomorrow until we get there. But today, each and every day, we keep choosing. Evil is patient, always waiting for us, always ready for us. It only takes a moment.

So Christ is patient too. The WAY is available, and it is designed to be walked each and every day. It never bores us, because it requires constant attention, constant effort, constant learning and deciding. But sometimes we get weary or rebellious or prideful. And evil is waiting, waiting for those days – the opportune time. It only takes a moment.

Now, I could have said all this in just one phrase: “Practicing Your Religion.” But I wanted you to know where the phrase comes from and what is at stake, what practicing our religion is all about, and why it matters. We can run out of enthusiasm, but we cannot suspend the issues. We practice our religion, and the instant we stop, evil is waiting. We do not even have to *stop* practicing; we can switch to practicing in the wrong way, for the wrong reasons, or for unconscious motives – and evil no longer has to wait.

Anyway, it seemed like an appropriate time to mention the subject. Do you constantly think about practicing your religion? Does a clear program come into mind when you think of that phrase? If you have children, have you taught and showed them how to practice their

religion? Some members of our youth group are away today on retreat, learning and talking about such things. Great kids. Most of the group could not be there, of course. They had band practice and hockey games. No matter what the date or time or year, that is always true. To practice for the band or for hockey (or whatever) is important. To practice religion? They can do that anytime, when there is nothing better or more important to do. Yet some of the kids would rather have been on the retreat. So why does the band leader or the coach have that kind of power over the kids and I do not? The band leader and the coach have that kind of power because we gave it to them. We used to give it to the church, but not anymore. It means, I suppose, that we no longer think it is important to practice our religion. If that is what we think, we will get what we deserve. And we have: a society that worships music and sports and does not know very much about Jesus or prayer or the Christian Life. So I ask myself: "Why should I care, if you do not?" But I do care. I cannot help it.

I did not get to watch all of the recent Olympics, but I watched more than I expected to. It certainly did have an almost hypnotic fascination, didn't it? One day a man named Moses was being interviewed. Later on I saw him run for the gold in a hurdling event, and that was impressive. It made what he had said in the interview even more impressive too. Though I paraphrase, he was saying: "Sometimes it is hard to keep practicing. But I know every day that if I am not practicing, still somewhere in the world somebody is practicing. If I hope to win, I better get back to it."

After the hypnotic spell wore off, I got to wondering why that had impressed me so. I have watched somebody run hurdles maybe a total of four or five times in my life. There is nothing wrong with it, but I don't really care about it all that much. If nobody ever ran hurdles again as long as I live, I doubt if I would miss it very much. In fact, I'm quite certain that I would never notice it unless somebody went out of their way to point it out to me. So what do I care whether or not Moses practices?

Well, I don't. But I am grateful to him for reminding me. If we care about our faith, we will practice our religion like athletes eager for the gold. In the spiritual race, however, I don't mind if others win their goal. I hope they do. In fact, on the spiritual track, all of us do win exactly what we run for. On the other hand, sometimes mere collegiality does not seem enough, does it? I do not see why "my" God should be worshipped shabbily, off-handedly, or less well in

comparison to other gods. Why does my God deserve less devotion, obedience, loyalty, or commitment than, say, the gods of sport or music?

On top of that, we have the gods of fundamentalism, of communism, of other religions, and of all the cults they continue to spawn among us. Maybe they can all win in some fashion that I cannot fathom, and that's fine with me if it is supposed to be so. It really is not my problem one way or the other. Only, I do not see why my God should be worshipped less well than other gods. I do not believe that the Lord Christ deserves less devotion, obedience, loyalty, or commitment than any of the others. To me, naturally, it seems like He deserves far better. But that's my business. And leaving room for whatever variations there are in your experience and awareness of the Lord Christ, it is your business too! Our God is not at our mercy – except in the Way of the Cross. That is, God's own survival in the realms beyond is not in our hands. But all that is known about God here; all that matters between earth and heaven; the knowledge of God's love and purpose; the worship; the obedience; the Kingdom in our midst – all of that depends entirely and solely on how we practice our religion.

That brings us, I suppose and suspect, to the practical end of practicing our religion. Just what is in our minds when we think of practicing our religion? We know it is strenuous. We know it always seems a little more than we can keep up with. We know it takes constant effort and attention and that it challenges us to keep growing and learning and striving all the time. But just what is it we are practicing?

Well, I could go through the regular list – daily prayer, Bible study, tithing, finding our vocatio, priesthood, doing deeds of mercy, finding our place in the body of Christ. But something a little more general has been fascinating me lately (again). It is one of those new/old truths that may seem “old hat” to some of you, while perhaps may be fresh to a few others who, like me, keep forgetting it or letting it drift out of focus. My mother used to say, “Nobody trips over the Redwood trees. It's the vines that get us.” I always nod and think “That's right!” And then I forget.

Looking back, most of my life I have thought about “practicing my religion” in terms of doing dramatic and courageous things. It has also meant refraining from the more dramatic and famous sins. From

this, we get a caricature that takes religion out of daily affairs and simple, daily things – where it really belongs the most. From this, practicing our religion means we do not commit armed robbery or personally murder innocent children in cold blood, and we should be missionaries in a foreign land or at least be at the forefront of some just or humane cause (e.g., racial justice, world peace, feeding the hungry, saving the environment).

I am simply saying that when I look inside myself – to the conscience I have been given, to the hero stories I have been told, to the expectations that lurk within – this is what most often comes up. Practicing my religion means refraining from great sins and engaging in great causes for the Kingdom.

I think the Lord will continue to call people into service in dramatic ways at times. It is certain that great issues and moments do arise, and that the Lord's people will be among those present when that happens. But more and more I suspect that this is not the heart or core of practicing our religion. This is the exception. Even when it is required, it comes as a by-product. A person already practicing their religion comes into a dramatic time, and suddenly they are seen in a dramatic light. But practicing their religion was going on long before the spotlight fell on them, and probably long after it left them. And if anything, the dramatic moment was an interruption and a temptation from the spiritual life. I remember hearing that very note from the saints again and again, now that I stop to think about it.

The practice of religion, I am suggesting, has to do with a constant and daily task of being “peaceful.” Not marching in a peace movement, but *being* peaceful in thought and attitude and approach to events and people. To be peaceful in a traffic jam; under pressure on a busy day; when tension and arguments arise at home or at work or wherever. Not being aloof, uninvolved, or pretending, but practicing a quality of trust and confidence in God that simply is “peacefulness.”

Practicing religion is being grateful every day, and practicing to be more grateful and for a greater portion of the time each day. To simply be aware and appreciative of Life and all its wonder, whether things are going well or not or whether we happen to approve of or feel in control of what is taking place or not. To be humble, joyful, simple, content, calm, and patient in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. I suspect *that* is practicing our religion far more than any daring deeds or glaring goodness. Such things cannot be

genuine unless we also grow close to our God. Jesus can save us (we cannot save ourselves), but we can practice these new attitudes and approaches that come with our believing it and trusting Him.

Seeing the good in others; understanding in our hearts and souls a little more of what is happening around us and in the lives of others; straight appreciation for the mystery and miracle of it all – I think that is practicing our religion. If we do this and keep doing the obvious disciplines of devotion, we will be ready should a dramatic occasion arise for us and the Spirit sees fit to tap us on the shoulder for special duty. Only, that will not be the hope or purpose anymore. It never really was. To serve God quietly and humbly and in gratitude has always been the goal – not to make a big splash or get a lot of credit.

Perhaps somebody is now thinking that I have suggested sort of a quiet, lovely, and easy life, or that I am suggesting we should back off and take it all rather loosely. No, not quite; think again. Being peaceful is a far more strenuous assignment than joining a peace movement. To practice peacefulness each day takes daily awareness, attention, focus, concentration. To move from what and where we are to lives of “peace” requires strenuous, faithful, purposeful effort. Why do you suppose there are so few genuinely peaceful people around?

Is it not also so with learning to be grateful or humble or joyful or simple or content or patient? Such soft words, we think, but is it not also exciting to seriously contemplate what life would be like for us if these words became our own inner reality? And what about love? Love, I suspect, should not be included in this category. Love comes upon us, takes over sometimes, wings in like a gift sometimes – when we practice these other things with diligence and add to that our personal willingness to be obedient to God.

In any case, the subject today is not love, but practicing our religion. It is a thing we are very eager to do, yet a thing we do not want to be reminded about. It is the most exciting enterprise in the world, yet also something that seems maybe dreadful. The only thing we know for sure is that a religion which is not practiced is of no use at all.