

Hebrews 3:5-14

Holding Fast

...whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end – v. 6

Picture, if you would, a mariner out at sea during a storm. The waves are crashing against the ship and some of those waves splash right over the deck. The crew of the ship must take refuge below for anybody left above would surely be swept away unless they had something to firmly grasp. One solitary figure does stay above and that's the helmsman of the ship. He keeps hold of the helm and utilizes all his strength to keep the ship from surrendering to those strong winds that would either capsize the ship or blow it so far off course that the ship would be helplessly lost if it managed to survive the storm at all.

We're actually given a picture similar to the one I've described in Psalm 107:23-27 where we read of *They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; These see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep. For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits' end.*

What does a man do that is raised so high and then plunges to great depths? What does a man do who is being battered by the storms of life so that he staggers like a drunken man and is at his wits' end? In the 107th Psalm we're told those that find themselves in this condition *cry unto the Lord in their trouble*. And that's certainly a good thing to do. But if I could bring the image I've been describing into the setting of our text in Hebrews I would add that such a person is taught to *hold fast*. Indeed I don't see any incompatibility between the Psalm and our text. A part of holding fast is crying to the Lord in our trouble.

Look at what it says in v. 6 *But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end*. We find the same thing conveyed to us in v. 14 *For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end*. The phrase *hold fast* in v. 6 and the word *hold* in v. 14 are identical words in the Greek. There is an emphasis, therefore, on holding fast – holding fast firm unto the end (v. 6) and Holding our confidence stedfast unto the end (v. 14).

We would do well to look at this point of emphasis as it fits into the flow of the argument of this epistle. We are to give earnest heed to the things which we have heard because those things have been spoken by Christ. He is greater than the prophets – He is greater than the angels so we ought to pay very close attention to what He has spoken. But we should go a step further. We should carefully consider Him who is the Apostle and High Priest of our profession. And in our contemplations of Him we should note that His faithfulness is superior even to such a great Old Testament character as Moses. *Moses*, we

read in v. 5 *was faithful in all his house, as a servant*. Christ we read in v. 6 is not in the house but over the house and is not merely a servant but a son. In our last study we noted the superiority of the faithfulness of Christ in His prophetic ministry, in His priestly intercession and in His pastoral care of the people of God.

In the light of all these things, Paul argues, we should hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end. Our failure to do so would indicate that we are not a part of the house that Christ is building (v. 6) and our failure to do so would also indicate that we are not partakers of Christ (v. 14).

You see the importance, then, of holding fast and in our study this morning I simply want to sound the exhortation that:

We Must Hold Fast

And in order to encourage you and instruct you to take heed to the exhortation to hold fast would you consider with me first of all:

I. What Things We're to Hold Fast

Verses 6 & 14 both make mention of our confidence. *If we hold fast the confidence* – v. 6 – *if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end* (v. 14).

These are actually two different words in the original Greek but the ideas are similar. In v. 6 the meaning is *free and fearless confidence, cheerful courage, boldness, assurance*. It's the same word that is translated *boldly* in that familiar verse that we'll get to in the next chapter *let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need*. Let us come boldly or in other words let us come with confidence before this throne of grace – confidence that we'll be heard – confidence that the Lord will indeed minister grace and mercy to us – confidence that we will be welcomed even into the very throne room of heaven into the presence of Christ.

The word for *confidence* in v. 14 is the same word that is translated *substance* in that well known definition of faith given to us in 11:1. *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*. Faith is the substance or the confidence of things hoped for.

And so you take both of these ideas and combine them together and you see what it is we're to hold fast. We're to hold fast that fearless confidence and cheerful courage – we're to hold fast the substance of our faith. And the substance of our faith, of course, is Christ. We're to hold to the One who has spoken to us in these last days. We're to hold to the One that we are contemplating to be our Apostle and High Priest. We're to hold to the One who is greater than the angels and greater than Moses. We're to hold fast our assurance, in other words, that He is who He claimed to be and that He's done what He claimed to do in purging our sins and reconciling us to God.

There's something of an apparent contradiction in the lesson to hold fast our confidence isn't there? The very fact that we would have to be instructed to hold fast our confidence would indicate that our confidence is beginning to wane and grow weaker. That was certainly the case with these Hebrew Christians. Their confidence in Christ was being shaken by the severe and trying circumstances they found themselves in. I think they were manifesting the same doubts that John the Baptist manifested when he was in prison. You remember how John sent two of his disciples to Christ to ask Him – *Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?* (Mt. 11:3).

How often do we demonstrate the same lack of confidence because of the trials in life that we experience? It's easy to be confident in Christ when we're healthy and well and everything is going smoothly and life seems to be lived on flowery beds of ease. But let a storm arise and like the disciples in the stormy sea we're tempted to think that Christ doesn't care that we perish – that Christ isn't interested enough to take up our case – that Christ perhaps isn't really who I thought Him to be because I thought that He would care and that He would have done something by now. This is nothing but a loss of confidence in who Christ is and what Christ has done to demonstrate His love.

It's interesting to note, isn't it, that in v. 14 we're told to *hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end*. Think back to the beginning of your Christian experience – what confidence you had in Christ then. You felt the oppression of sin's guilt. Like Christian, in Pilgrim's Progress, you carried a heavy burden and there was never any escape from it. It went everywhere with you. It was with you while you were awake and it was with you while you slept. It was the burden of being under God's wrath because your conscience testified to you that you come short of the glory of God and nothing you have done or could do would ever enable you to measure up to the demands of God's law.

And then you learned of Christ who was mighty to save. You heard the gospel and you learned how Christ bore your sins and appeased the righteous anger of God against you. You went from death to life and you discovered a new vitality that caused old things to pass away and all things to become new. You had the confidence that comes from the simplicity of a child-like faith because you implicitly trusted Christ and as result your soul was set free. You escaped the burden of sin's guilt and gained the leverage to answer the accusations of the devil and your own conscience by simply stating that while you were unworthy of the least of God's blessings Christ was worthy of all the blessings that He purchased for you when He purchased you to Himself.

What a blessed confidence you gained in the beginning. Paul refers to this confidence when he writes to the Galatians and recalls the zeal that was theirs in the beginning. *For I bear you record* he writes in Gal. 4:15 *that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me*. Such was the beginning of their confidence that they were willing to make any sacrifice for the man who had communicated the gospel to them. But like the Hebrews in our text, those Galatian Gentiles were being lured away from their confidence so that Paul had to ask them in that same verse *Where is then the blessedness ye spake of?* Their confidence was waning.

And so we all find ourselves in need of having to hold fast our confidence the same way we embraced it in the beginning of our experience of Christ. In v. 6 we're also told that we're to hold fast *the rejoicing of the hope*. In Romans 5 we find a direct connection between this rejoicing and our justification. (Turn to Rom. 5:1-5)

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.

The word *rejoice* in v. 2 is the same word as *glory* in v. 3 and this same word is sometimes translated by the word *boast*. We rejoice, then, in anticipation of the glory of God and we glory or we boast even in tribulations because we see in our tribulations not a series of meaningless and adverse circumstances that serve no other purpose but to make our lives miserable – we see, rather, even in the harsh circumstances of life a divine purpose of working patience and experience which leads us to grow all the more anxious for glory and the thing that generates all this is the love of God being shed abroad in our hearts.

And here is what will keep our confidence strong – the reality of Christ's love. When we read of the love of God shed abroad in our hearts we're reading of something that takes us beyond the theory or the mere dogma of Christ's love into the reality of the experience of that love. This is what's essential and this is something that we need to seek God for when we approach His throne of grace. *Lord, grant that the love of God through Christ will be shed abroad in my heart so that your grace and mercy and lovingkindnesses will not be merely a part of my creed but they'll be the reality of my life and the governing force in my heart.* Because when the love of Christ rules my heart then I will not only endure the tribulations of life but I will glory and rejoice in Christ even in the midst of those tribulations.

We see, then, some of the things that we are to hold fast. If you would care to expand the study outside of this epistle to the Hebrews you'll discover that we're to *hold fast that which is good* (1Thess. 5:21); and we're to *Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus* (2Tim. 1:13); and we're to *hold fast* that which we have already until Christ comes (Rev. 2:25).

But we must move on to face the truth that there are spiritual forces that will strive to loosen your grip on the things you're to hold fast. And this leads to my next point which is:

II. The Thing that Leads to the Loosening of our Grip

Go back in your mind's eye to that mariner I referred to in my introduction – the mariner at sea. When the sea is calm and the sailing is smooth it's no problem for the mariner to

keep hold of the helm. But in the storms he encounters at sea he meets great resistance from the wind and it becomes a daunting challenge to hold the helm and keep the ship on course. So in the believer's life he encounters these forces of resistance – forces that, at times, may be like those stormy winds but perhaps more often these forces, unlike the wind in a storm, may be much more subtle.

We see this subtle force of resistance in vv. 7,8 where we read: *Wherefore as the Holy Ghost saith, Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness.* Hardness of heart is this force of resistance. And the reason I call it subtle is because it's directly tied to the deceitfulness of sin in v. 13. Heb 3:13 *But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.* Something that is deceitful is subtle.

Not it's rather ironic to read the phrase *hardness of heart* with reference to the Israelites for it was Pharaoh, in the book of Exodus, that we're told on a number of occasions hardened his heart toward the Lord in refusing to let the Israelites go. In Pharaoh's case this hardness of heart meant deliberate and obstinate resistance to what God was commanding him.

The Israelites, on the other hand, had pledged to Moses that all that God commanded they would do. How is it, then, that we find hardness of heart attributed to them? In their case I believe hardness of heart refers to that loss of spiritual sensitivity that leads them to be taken up only by what the carnal eye sees rather than what the eyes of faith can see. And in the wilderness they reached the place where all they could see was their difficulties.

It's easy to look at their example and marvel when we read the account of their powerful deliverance from Egypt and how the plagues were unleashed upon the Egyptians while the Israelites were protected and how the Red Sea was opened for them while the armies of Egypt were destroyed and how the Lord supernaturally provided manna for them and tended to their every need. How could those who had seen so much supernatural power wrought for them become hard in heart? And could the ones who heard the voice of God and beheld the awful scene of the Lord descending upon Mt. Sinai yet have their hearts go hard?

We know it to be the case. And the key contributing factor was their grumbling spirit and the desire to return to Egypt. This cost them their spiritual sensitivity. Hardness of heart, then, is a plague to be dreaded by the Christian more than any disease that could effect his body. We should dread this plague of hardness of heart more than we dread the swine-flu or as much as we would dread Aids, or cancer, or any other killer disease.

Hardness of heart, you see, is what kills the vitality of religion and reduces it to assent to a creed and a hollow effort to measure up to a code of conduct. Hardness of heart is what externalizes religion and turns the professor of religion at best into what Christ called a white-washed sepulchre. In Christ's day it was an act of judgment upon the nation that they were given over to hardness of heart.

I can't help but feel that the same judgment is upon our nation today and the thing to note about such a judgment is that it begins first at the house of God. I'm not talking about the hardness of sinners toward the gospel – that hardness has always existed on account of the sinner's depravity. But the hardness I'm now referring to is the hardness that infects Christians and robs them of the experience I described a moment ago of having the love of God shed abroad in our hearts. Parents ought to fear for their children that their children are not given over to this hardness of heart. Indeed parents should fear for themselves that their children won't be subjected to the same lack of spiritual sensitivity that they themselves as parents know too well.

This lack of spiritual sensitivity, you see, loosens your grip on the things you're suppose to hold fast. You may retain some form of orthodoxy or you may not. The evidence that a heart is hard is when you more or less shrug your shoulders at orthodoxy all together and say to yourself that it's not really all that important nor are other Christian practices deemed to be all that important either.

How do you know whether or not your heart is hard? You can be sure that a hard-hearted professor of Christianity is for the most part a prayerless Christian. And you can be sure that his time in the word of God is negligible. You may see him in church but you rarely, if ever, see him effected by the preaching of the word of God. His interests grow in the things of the world while his interests in spiritual things diminish. He can talk about the things of the world – he can discuss the weather, or discuss sports or discuss the latest forms of entertainment but when it comes to spiritual things there's not much he can say because there's not much vitality to his interest in Christ.

And practically speaking you would have to say of him that he's governed by unbelief and that he's practically departed from the living God (v. 12) if he hasn't formally renounced his faith. It's interesting, isn't it, that reference is made to departing from the living God. God may be a concept or a theory to such a person who is hard of heart but God is anything but the true and living God because there is no vitality to the religion of a man who is hard of heart.

This is the force then that will work to loosen our grip on the things we're to hold fast and we can go a long way in preventing such a condition if we'll see the awful danger of it and learn to dread it with every fiber of our being.

It remains for us to consider then,

III. How We Hold Fast those Things that Must be Held

We've described what they are – the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope. We've seen the force that must be resisted to hold fast these things – hardness of heart must be resisted or must be overcome when it lures us away from our confidence. We come now to think for a moment on what we must do in order to hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope.

Note what it says in v. 7 *Wherefore as the Holy Ghost saith, To day if ye will hear his voice harden not your hearts.* The first thing necessary, then, in holding fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope is a willingness to hear His voice. We must hear God Himself speaking to our hearts through the word of God as that word is preached and as that word is read and studied.

We are, of course, dependent upon God in this matter and so we would do well to cry to God to grant us the help of His Spirit so that our hearts will be open and pliable before God. And we need to make our time in the word a time of worship in which we present ourselves to God and study the Bible not as a theology text book or a code of conduct manual but we make our time in the word a devotional exercise in which we are meeting with our God and Savior and we are expectant that it will be the still small voice of God's Spirit bearing witness to the truth of His word and making the application to our hearts.

Heart preparation is a necessary exercise also for coming to the house of God to worship. Too often, I'm afraid, we treat coming to the house of God as if we were coming to a classroom. We do come to learn but we're looking for more than academic benefit to our time in God's house. We come to present ourselves to God and we come to learn and hear from our God as the means of grace are utilized especially the preaching of God's word.

I wonder how many here this morning actually take the time to pray and meditate and think about what you're about to engage in when you come to the Lord's house. How often must we lament the times we've come and gone to the house of God and have come away empty? That's the sure path to a hard heart. And so we must hear His voice and notice that we must hear His voice today! *Today if ye will hear his voice.* Today and each day we must hear His voice if we would hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.

And then note what we find in Heb 3:13 *But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.* This is going to be a recurring theme from this point forward in this epistle to the Hebrews – this theme of exhorting one another or provoking one another to good works. The emphasis is on ministering to one another and what underlies this theme is the truth that we often times treat carelessly which is that we need one another.

There is no such thing as an independent Christian. There is no such thing as a Christian that can thrive spiritually on his own. If such a thing were possible we would make a liar out of Christ. Listen to Paul's description of how the body of Christ functions in Eph 4:16 *From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.*

And so we hold fast to the confidence and rejoicing of the hope by taking each other to heart and encouraging one another to go on with Christ. And so I wonder this morning are you holding fast – or are you losing your grip? Is the hope you hold a source of rejoicing to your soul that imparts strength to your heart for the rigor of life? Or is hardness of heart

becoming the norm? You can be sure that if it's normal for you to go through the empty motions of religion without the vitality that the joy of salvation imparts to your soul, then your children will know that same lack of spiritual vitality in their lives and however loosely you hold fast you can pretty much count on them letting go altogether. After all who wants to follow dead religion? Who wants to be even an orthodox dead weight?

We must, then, hold fast – hold firmly, hold steadfastly to the end by utilizing the means of grace and ministering to each other. May God help us so to do that we may avoid hardness of heart which will only grieve and provoke our God and lead to our losing out with Him.