

ATTRIBUTES OF A CHRISTIAN WARRIOR

When the bell rings at the end of tonight's class, we will have concluded our study of Colossians, at least for a while. We never "finish" with a biblical writing; we simply stop for a while and go on to other places. I have been studying, reading, pondering, praying off of and out of Paul's letter to the Colossians since early last December. Needless to say, I have been the most excited about, and have received the most benefit from, our time with Colossians. I know far more about this wonderful little letter than ever before in my life. And I truly appreciate your letting me share some of it with you.

I do propose to spend the rest of the summer and into the fall telling you Bible stories, both on Sundays and on Wednesday evenings. Of course, you will recognize most of these stories. But I call it "Review & Renew." I have not milked these stories dry, even after all these years. So I suspect maybe you have not either. These are stories that are foundational for what we know and understand about our Faith. It is our experience – that is, it is the way we turn our own lives into what we learn from our stories – that reveals what we have really learned and what we truly believe. Amazing though it seems, we are invited to become part of the story that God is telling. That is the Gospel. It is the Good News of Jesus Christ that we are invited to become part of The Story.

Then sometime this fall, we will take a serious look at Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Colossians is to Ephesians what Galatians is to Romans. If that sounds like gobbledygook, stick around. You may discover that it gets pretty interesting.

With that wonderful little preamble, let's turn to one more look at the picture of the Christian Life that Paul sets before us in his letter to the Colossians. He is talking to a tiny band of new Christians in the little town of Colossae about 54 A.D. But I propose to listen in. First, a few closing remarks about Colossians.

I hope you know that there are many gems in this short letter that we did not touch. At least we did not lift them up. *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God."* (Colossians 3:16) At one point I had outlined two

and a half sermons from this one verse alone. What is the “word of Christ”? Is it a composite of the words we think Jesus spoke? On the other hand, Jesus is the Word made flesh. “*In the beginning was the Word.*” And already we are way beyond what might be covered in a single sermon or class.

This is a very joyful comment from Paul about singing and hymns and psalms, don’t you think? Wouldn’t it be great if we could sit in on some of the worship services the early church was having back in the first century A.D.? What was music really like for them? But you cannot bring up the subject of music or singing hymns in most churches today without starting a war. Some of you are half eager to start such a war; but in *The New Church*, there is no good reason, at least not yet, to justify the bloodshed. All of us have the means to play the music we love, right where we are. So what do we gain by trying to force whatever music we like onto each other? Maybe someday we will discover a way to proceed that will bless us. Meanwhile, we can each fill our own space, even before and after worship, with all the music we want, and with the music that speaks to us best.

We never got into the fourth chapter of Colossians. The fourth chapter contains some personal notes and other interesting comments. Was Apphia Philemon’s wife? (Philemon 1:2) Was Archippus his son? Is verse 17 encouragement to a young man, or an admonition to a recalcitrant teenager? I wish I knew more, but even I can sometimes decide to be silent, or at least circumspect, when there is simply too little information to justify any guesses.

“Luke greets you” (verse 14) has been used to “prove” that Paul is writing from Rome. We know Luke was with Paul in Rome, and we assume Luke was in Philippi until the tail end of the third journey. Therefore Luke would not have been in Ephesus during this time when Paul was a prisoner in Ephesus. Yet the case for Paul writing Colossians from Ephesus is much stronger than the original assumptions that he was writing from Rome. So what do we do with this comment to the Colossian Christians that Luke sends them greetings?

Are there other possibilities or probabilities? Does Paul say Luke is with him? No. Maybe Paul wrote a letter to Luke, mentioning his concern for the situation in Colossae, and Luke’s greetings came in a reply from Philippi. On the other hand, are we forbidden to consider that Luke might have heard that Paul was in prison in Ephesus, and that he

came from Philippi to see how Paul was and to help him if possible? Prison does not always mean San Quentin. It can be anything from house arrest to a dungeon. In any case, friends and relatives often gathered to support and care for a loved one in prison. The Book of Acts does not mention Luke taking a trip from Philippi to visit Paul in Ephesus, and Luke wrote Acts. But maybe Luke was not particularly egotistical and had no particular reason for mentioning it. So how much certainty can we actually claim from this comment that Luke sends his greetings? And if we can think of this many possibilities, none of them as far-fetched as an assumption that Colossians was written from Rome, then perhaps it is not sound scholarship to claim that we know where Luke was at the time.

I do hope you all now know that Paul's letters to the Colossians and to Philemon are connected: written at the same time; carried by Tychicus and Onesimus at the same time; delivered to Colossae and to Philemon, in whose house the Colossian church met, at the same time. Therefore, if we learn something about one of these letters, it applies to the other. The end of the letter to Philemon says: "*Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greeting to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.*"

Most commentaries assume that such an august group of Christians must have been in Rome. Why? Well, they are mentioned in the letter to Philemon, and Paul wrote to Philemon from Rome, so therefore they must have been in Rome. That is called a "circular argument." I keep suggesting that it is far more likely, far more probable, that Paul wrote Colossians and Philemon from Ephesus, and ten years earlier. Is it possible that Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke were in Ephesus at this time (53-54 A.D.)? Ephesus was only the second greatest city of the Roman Empire at the time. Epaphras was a fellow prisoner with Paul, and Paul had already told us that Epaphras founded the church in Colossae. (Colossians 1:7) It is far more likely that Epaphras was with Paul in Ephesus, not Rome. Aristarchus did indeed go to Rome with Paul, and through the shipwreck that nearly cost them their lives. But Aristarchus was from Thessalonica, and we know he was with Paul during the big riot caused by Demetrius the silversmith – and that was in Ephesus. So we do have Aristarchus located in Ephesus at the very time in question.

Demas later forsook Paul and went off to Thessalonica. It is not proof, but it is easier to go to Thessalonica from Ephesus than it is from

Rome. We simply do not know for sure. My point is that none of our evidence favors Rome over Ephesus. And since I know that some of you will be reading commentaries and Bible dictionaries that contradict what I have been teaching you, I just wanted to make sure you know: It is not because I have not thought about the other possibilities. It is not because the other scenarios are stronger or more logical. The picture I have tried to give you is simpler, clearer, and hangs together better than any other picture you are likely to hear about.

And now for a few stray comments from chapter three that I hope most of you don't need. Nevertheless, many of us have come through quite a bit of religious "programming" that tends to surface every time we get careless. So just in case:

Verse 6: "*On account of these the wrath of God is coming.*" I wonder: Did any of you hear this as a familiar threat about the coming fires of Hell? Paul never threatens us with Hell. He does not think that way. Paul thinks we are already in bondage – to Sin, Death, and the Devil. Paul is not trying to save us from Hell; he is trying to get us out of the bondage we are already in. Paul does not preach "fear"; he preaches "freedom." And Paul does not think Jesus is about "wrath to come," but about mercy, grace, forgiveness, and release unto a truly glorious future – whenever we are willing to accept it and step into it. I just reiterated verse 4, if you missed it: "*When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*"

So what about this "*wrath that is coming*" on account of "*sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry*"? Please, I am not trying to claim that Scripture never speaks about the punishment of God. Often it is portrayed as a specific and personal punishment, starting with Adam and Eve. I have come to believe that this is always a misunderstanding – a human perspective that is off the mark. God is always trying to correct, and we frequently interpret this as punishment. Every parent knows the feeling (the sorrow), and knows the child will not really change or grow until they stop seeing it as punishment and realize that it is correction. That is: Punishment is trying to make us suffer for mistakes or wrongdoing. Correction is trying to keep us from the consequences of further mistakes and wrong choices. Correction is trying to aim us toward a better life.

But frequently Scripture also understands the wrath of God as referring to the natural laws of creation working toward their natural

consequences. If you walk off a cliff, the law of gravity will inflict on you the wrath of God. No private or personal punishment is intended. It is creation working according to the principles and rules by which it was created to work. Of course, it can still hurt like hell, though hell was not intended. Most of the time, the law of gravity saves us and preserves us in life. It's only when we get crosswise to its way of working that we suffer the consequences in a negative way. And this is the way Paul is using "wrath" in this passage. Sexuality is not evil or wrong any more than gravity is. But if we get crosswise to the way sexuality is created to be a blessing ... well, if I have not made my point by now, I probably cannot make it.

"Do not lie to one another." Satan is the Father of Lies! Satan accomplishes much of his work by showing us things that are not true or by threatening us with things that are not true. They are *almost* true. Satan slips in a tiny addition or leaves out a tiny omission – just enough to confuse the careless. We must not cooperate with Satan by helping to further deceit.

"Here there is neither Greek nor Jew, ... Scythian, slave or freeman; but Christ is all, and in all." A Scythian was a barbarian from "the wild lands" north of the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. The Roman Empire had never conquered them, and Rome still seemed to fear them. Scythians were one of the "bogeymen" of the Roman Empire. Despite all her legions, Rome feared that one day hordes of Scythians would sweep down from the northeast and decimate them. Well, Scythians did scalp their enemies and use their skulls as drinking cups, and they offered human sacrifices. It is therefore interesting, if not dramatic, that Paul includes them in the list of those whom Jesus includes and cares about. The list of those whom Jesus includes – and who many of us do not think should be included – is always too long, is it not?

Okay. Enough of such details. On to more important things.

Paul reminds us that there are two ways of life, and that we should seek the higher way. There is more than one way to describe or indicate the two ways: The way of the flesh and the way of the Spirit. The way of darkness and the way of light. The high way and the low way. I think we sometimes get hung up on the description or vocabulary instead of seeking understanding. "Nitpicking," as we often call it, can sometimes seem to be us just trying for a clearer understanding. But frequently we ask questions or struggle with definitions when in reality it's just a

way to avoid the real issues. “What do you mean by ‘flesh’?” “What do you mean by ‘earthly’?” “Is it really bad to be earthy?” And on into the night ...

However, without much difficulty, we can recognize the behavioral aspects, attitudes, and goals behind these two ways. I will quote the full passage to make it easy for us to see how Paul is contrasting two rather different ways of life.

“Put to death (cut away from yourself): sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these, the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.”

It may not be true, but I find it difficult to imagine that any of us have a hard time recognizing either of these two ways. Some of us may possibly have more experience in one of these ways than some of the rest of us. Nevertheless, I suspect we all have experience enough to know what it is like when we start wanting our own way, wanting our own self-centered desires met, wanting our own personal list of cravings or immediate needs met without any concern or consideration for what this might mean or how it might affect other people. And in this state of mind, we can easily get into emotional whirlpools if our desires are thwarted: anger, abuse, vengeance, malice, tantrums. Our whole perspective – our outlook on life – can become corrupted if we stay in such a state for very long. We can even tell ourselves that our perspective is justified, that life is not treating us fairly, that the problem is the people around us or the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

There is “justification” by greed, lust, and covetousness – as well as “justification by faith.”

Would we rather have our lives circumscribed by such things, or filled with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience? Well, let me see ... let me think about that for a while. One of those “duh” questions, isn’t it? If we are not in the throes of lust or greed at the moment – that is, if we are in our right minds – it is clear and obvious which manner of life we would prefer. So what about mixing the two lists? Can we pick and choose? Can we mix a little kindness and meekness with a little covetousness, idolatry, and sexual immorality? Many have tried. It’s fun to play thought games, perhaps, but the truth is that the two different ways are different. They don’t mix. We can certainly flip back and forth, at times. But one way is always throwing out the other. It’s hard to keep my lust clear and strong, if I start to remember that she is one of God’s daughters. It’s even harder if I start to remember how much God loves her. Greed has the same difficulty, if I start to realize that the people I am hoping to cheat or outsmart are precious children of the God I claim to worship.

Always deeper than the description of character traits or behavior patterns is the matter of our allegiance. Who is our King? Who or what are we living for? Paul knows all too well that if we are not very clear about who we trust and where our true allegiance lies, we will get sucked back into the way of the flesh. We truly must die to the old way if we want to live with Christ.

So theory is fun, but this is not just a theory game. In real life as we know it, there is a battle going on. Forces more subtle and more powerful than most people acknowledge are constantly working to draw us toward one way or the other. With some reflection, it is possible for me to remember wanting to be in the “higher way” for as far back as I can remember. Is that not true in some ways for you too? I’m saying that as a little boy, I can remember wanting to be kind, caring, helpful, compassionate – and often I was. With a little reflection, I can also realize and remember that in all the years since, there have been times, more than I like to acknowledge, when I was drawn into the “lower way.” I wanted to get what I wanted, when I wanted it. Sometimes I told myself it was for a good cause. Some of us have considerable experience trying to use the methods of the “lower way” – anger, controlling others, impatience, threats, emotional blackmail. (How many kinds of coercion are there?) How often we have used such things, telling ourselves it was

in the service of good goals or causes. At least that's what we were trying to tell ourselves at the time. "Hey, I can make this thing grow and thrive ... if I apply some of these pressures."

Do I know, for certain – do I trust absolutely – that the Kingdom cannot be served except by the principles of the Kingdom? I certainly hope so! And when is the last time I tried to use an inappropriate method to bring some benefit to some person or purpose? Let's see, was it yesterday? Two days ago?

In theory, Paul's choice between the two ways may be a no-brainer. In reality and experience, it is not nearly as simple as we like to pretend. Allegiance to our Lord has to be bulletproof and foolproof or we cannot stay on the PATH with consistency and patient devotion. Nevertheless, it seems to me that we have little hope of learning to follow Jesus better by focusing on the behavior patterns. We follow better by attending to the allegiance itself – focusing on the relationship, the love-bond between us. Knowing the behavior patterns is mostly useful as an early warning system. If we start finding our lives fitting more and more into the attributes of the "lower way," it warns us that our relationship is out of focus, that our allegiance is no longer clear or centered. We cannot simply switch to the better behavior patterns. We have to go to the source of the behavior – find the places where our trust and allegiance are eroded or forgotten.

Nevertheless, we can be certain that if we miss the signs or do nothing about them, we will be drawn deeper and deeper into the morass of the "lower way." So some of us see the attributes Paul mentions in connection with the "higher way" as the attributes of a Christian warrior. We are in a battle, a conflict – no question. But what do we fight with? It is really treacherous if we have imagery that leads us astray. If I am a warrior for the Kingdom, I fight with humility, not with pride. I fight with compassion, not with anger. I fight with love, not with lust. (Love in this context is seeing and wanting what is best for another person – not by my light, but as I suspect Jesus might be seeing this other person.) It is a warrior's Way, but the weapons are strange to us at first. Often we think they will be quite ineffective. Sometimes they are. But what we know for sure is that the normal and familiar weapons are always and totally ineffective for achieving or accomplishing any of the things our Lord wants – the things that help to build His Kingdom.