

Jesus Juva

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ARMOR OF CHRIST

LESSON THREE

RIGHTEOUSNESS

“Web of Life”

Margaret stood at the end of the prayer session held in the Sunday school room adjacent to the sanctuary, its full pane glass windows making the altar clearly visible to all, and questioned as the only one with courage enough to speak the truth, “The real miracle is if a year from now we are still bringing meals to the home and offering to watch the children!” Terry, a young mother of two, had flipped her jeep black ice along Route 422, leaving her a paraplegic. The church had been holding prayer vigils and activated every prayer line within the borders of the Indiana county, praying for the miracle of walk. A fact that I, the pastor, the doctors at Allegheny General, and most knew would not be. Who would dare to admit that, at least publicly? The congregation did respond in those first few weeks with a Herculean effort of generosity and support, but would it be so in the twelfth month? Therein, would lie the true miracle, the continued presence of the community of faith.

Paul writes that an intricate piece of the Armor of Christ is to “put on the breastplate of righteousness.” (Eph 6:14) The word righteousness is a difficult word to interpret, so perhaps it is best to go directly to the *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* for an adequate definition, “Acting in accord with divine or moral law: free from guilt or sin.” Interpreting Terry’s situation, I was in one accord with Margaret, an elementary school teacher, that a “righteous” and “moral” congregation will still be ministering a year hence.

William Faulkner, upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949, said in his acceptance speech, “I feel that this award was not made to me as a man, but to my work – a life’s work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit, not for glory and least for profit, but to create out of the materials of the human spirit something which did not exist before.” These words are well chosen, as they should be from a writer, and applicable to Christian service. If we are to be adherents to divine and moral law, then, as righteous individuals, we should be making a lasting effect upon society, not only for this generation, but for those to come.

Most of us will escape any notoriety in life. Outside of a small circle of family and friends we shall remain anonymous. I would find this personally more disturbing, except when I realize that through two centuries the second most important elected person in our nation, the vice-president of the United States, remains nameless to most Americans except for the current occupant of that office.

As a young father I found an important purpose for living in a story told to me by my Aunt Emma, a saint still living a righteous life well into her 90s. We were walking Sandbridge Beach in Virginia when we paused to talk to strangers from another region. Strolling on she spoke more to herself, as if I was allowed to listen in on her private and intimate thoughts. She pondered that life be thought of as a spider web. Each person encountered becomes a part of one’s web. Her web attached to the web of the gracious couple to which we just spoke, became a part of their web of friendship, soon attached to another, and another. At the end of one’s life, she wondered, how far will that web have extended? How many lives will it have entwined? When looking down from heaven, my aunt wondered, what will our “web of life” encompass?

The breastplate of righteousness is that of discipleship. We are to be imitators of Jesus in the setting in which we have been placed, cleansing it of inequity, bestowing upon it civility. Understandably the task is not easy. Why else would we need to hold in one hand the shield of faith and in the other the sword of the Spirit?

On June 1, 1886, Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist minister, began his pastorate in the “Hell’s Kitchen” section of New York City. He arrived with the intent to evangelize, but his education “in individualistic conservatism” did not prepare him for the squalor of the city. Preaching individual salvation waned in the sight of the impoverished. As these souls suffered from industrialization and the disparity of wealth, Rauschenbusch redirected his efforts to a ministry that addressed the social needs of his congregants and their neighbors. Though he still believed in the return of Christ and a heavenly Kingdom, he realized there must coexist with this a temporal Kingdom of God that would answer to the working poor.

The writings that came forth from his pen instituted a new school of systematic theology known as the Social Gospel. It proposes that the gospel message must be actively practiced among the poor and destitute. It is a ministry in which we all have a part, as he wrote in his book *The Social Principles of Jesus*. Rauschenbusch instructed, “The great task of establishing a righteous social life on earth embraces all minor tasks in so far as they are good. The mother who tries to make a good home, the farmer who feeds the people, the teacher who trains them, the scientist who gets the facts for all, the merchant, the workingman, the artist, the leader in play – they all contribute to the Kingdom, provided they view their work so, and are trying to put an evolutionary *plus* into it which will lift the total nearer to the divine will. The Kingdom is the supreme task, and all small tasks are a part of it. That gives every man a place in it who works – where is the idler’s place in it? – and it hallows all good work with religious glory. It may seem as if this social aim of religion may depreciate the aim of developing our own personality and saving our souls. It ought not. Sometimes it does for a time. But we are each so enormously important to ourselves that we are not likely to forget ourselves, and the practical struggle with temptation and sorrow will teach us to seek strength for our personal needs from Christ. In time we shall learn to say with Jesus, ‘For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also may be sanctified.’”

Rauschenbusch did not discount the importance of the salvation message, but it cannot be preached without participation in social justice. Righteousness is able to discern the holistic nature of the scriptures. Wearers of the breastplate are to be

concerned about the individual and the community. It is to be focused both on the health of the soul and the vitality of the neighborhood. It is to be an equal dispenser of love and justice.

James Pickens, Jr. plays an unsavory and unwelcoming character on *Grey's Anatomy* as Dr. Richard "The Chief" Webber of Seattle Grace's hospital administrator. So let it be in TV Land for in the life that counts he has a blissful marriage of twenty-three years to Gina. He shares with the cast and any other who will pause long enough to listen the lesson for a happy marriage, "I tell them our mantra; Walk in love, forgive quickly and treat strife like a basket of rattlesnakes." A lesson for righteous living: embrace love – assail evil.

Soli deo Gloria,

Ron Love