

Jesus Juva

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ARMOR OF CHRIST

LESSON FOUR

PEACE

“step over the narrow bounds”

It only took a day after the November 6 election for the hate mail to arrive. No Chief Executive had ever received such an avalanche of correspondence, before or after occupation of the Oval Office. The letters came north, crossing the Mason-Dixon Line, each calling for his execution by gun, dagger, or hangman’s noose. Some were more creative than others. One letter had a fine sketch of the Devil stabbing the president with a three-pronged fork, pitching him into the fires of hell. If the letters were not message enough, there was the shattering of the panes of glass at his Springfield home, irreparable signs of ill will. Abraham Lincoln was troubled by these actions, forcefully stating that no “decent man” could engage in such actions of hate and disdain. Troubled enough by the letters, never casting aside the seriousness of the intent behind each, throughout the years in office he placed each one in an envelope labeled “Assassination.”

The Apostle Paul realized, first hand from his own persecutions and false imprisonments, that we are not a society of “decent men.” As a prominent Pharisee who converted to Christianity, he suffered the ridicule and ostracizing of the Jewish community. Tolerating him was not possible, ignoring him was inadequate, persecuting was acceptable. Thus, Paul traveled and preached under the harsh glare of criticism. Is it little wonder that he could write so eloquently and insightfully for the need to put on the Armor of Christ in defense against the Evil One?

The nastiest four letter word ever uttered is “hate,” yet it so easily rolls off the lips. And the word has a community of friends, many of which I still vividly remember as

a pervasive part my segregated Midwest childhood: Nigger, Coon, Spick, Mickey, Whitey, Jew, Uncle Tom, Chink, Brownie, Dago, Collie, Cracker, Kyke, Ginzo, Honkie, Oreo. This, in a mill town, where the African-Americans literally lived on the other side of the tracks, as the town fathers knowingly kept them in their place. This generation of young people may not be able to associate these slurs with any specific ethnic group, and though our neighborhoods have slowly integrated, only an ostrich would fail to realize the sentiment has not dissipated.

This is why Paul, from personal experience, instructed that we begin the day, “As for shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.” (Ep 6:15) Paul knew that it was the cross, not the calling forth legions of angels, that testified to the ministry of Jesus. It was a mission of reconciliation, acceptance and forgiveness. Brotherhood would not be restored with the sword or with the disparity of social wealth, but it would come with the invitation of a tax collector to dine in your home, embracing a leper, and the willingness to carry the weapons of occupation an extra mile. Peace challenges us return to the original tranquility of Adam and Eve; counter to our natural inclination to dominate, induced by Cain and Abel.

Jesus and Paul never discounted the message of the prophets, so the words of Isaiah remain solemn in any century, “and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks.” (2:4) Equally edifying words, Isaiah pronounced, “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.” (11:6) The reader of these profound statements finds comfort in knowing that he or she is an exemplary example of each, for a switchblade has been taken to none and Max and Max (the 2007 most popular names for dog and cat alike) drink amiably from the same water bowl. How easily we forget the sharp edge of the sword of gossip and the growl of the lion when looking upon another with prejudice. How we realize the plowshare turns over only animosity when the furrow is one of jealousy and the lamb runs when approached with malevolent thoughts.

It is only the shoes of peace that can restore the harmony of fellowship. Reflecting on Paul’s passage from Ephesians, Augustine wrote, “Of what thing the shoe except the

Gospel? How beautiful the feet of them that tell peace, that tell of good things, and the feet shod unto the preparation of the Gospel of peace.”

Paul cautions that we wear the armor of our Lord in preparation for the final eschatological battle against the powers of darkness. Walking in peace is not a stroll through the park nor is it a gentle meandering along a surfside beach. It is serious undertakings through a mountain crevasse where brigands lurk. It is not for the fainthearted, but empowered by the Spirit those whose apparel is the Armor of Christ, are adequately commissioned and protected.

Thascius Cyprian, born into a well educated family that afforded him the same opportunity, reluctantly accepted the office of Bishop of Carthage in 248 A.C.E. He did so, in personal opposition to his highly publicized belief there was no place for a hierarchal organization within the church, for all worshipers were ‘co-presbyters.’ Arrested during the Decian persecution for refusing to offer a sacrifice to the Roman state-gods, he was ordered to be executed by the sword, and in his dying words confessed, “Deo Gratias I,” meaning “Thanks I be to God.” A life reflected in teaching, as Cyprian forthrightly acknowledged the seriousness of the commission that his followers wear the shoes of peace walking among hostile overseers. This belief was recorded with this admonition in “The Epistles of Cyprian,” a letter to the churches that was not canonized, “let our feet be shod with evangelical teaching, and armed, so that when the serpent shall begin to be trodden and crushed by us, he may not be able to bite and trip us up.” Shall we walk upon the forbidden floors where serpents dwell, that peace may be restored in our homes, our places of employment, within our community, and even, we must confess, among our own congregants? Vipers bite, the poison stings – shall the gospel of peace prevail?

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, in a sermon titled “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon On The Mount, Discourse III,” dedicated several pages of text outlining the Christian characteristics of being a peace-maker. Peace is insightfully expressed in Wesley’s oration, “In its literal meaning it implies those lovers of God and man who utterly detest and abhor all strife and debate, all variances and contentions; and accordingly labour with all their might, either to prevent this fire of hell from being

kindled, or, when it is kindled, from breaking out, or when it is broke out, from spreading any further.” Wesley goes on to state that the peace-maker “but steps over the narrow bounds, that he may do good to every man, that he may, some way or other, manifest his love to neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies.” As a Methodist, do you accept your heritage as one who “steps over the narrow bounds” to be a peace-maker?

Soli Deo Gloria,

Ron Love