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BIGGEST BUYER

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THIS WEEK'S SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

THE CHRISTIAN'S WAR (Temperance)

Golden Text.—It is neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing where by thy brother stumbleth.—Rom. 14:21.

THE LESSON AS A WHOLE

Approach to the Lesson
Of all the figures which the Apostle Paul uses to describe the Christian life, those of the soldier and the athlete stand out prominently. As if they were his favorites. There is no indication that he ever was a soldier, and, if we are to accept tradition about his physical condition, he could scarcely have been an athlete (see 2 Cor 10:10; 12:7, 9). Yet he shows remarkable acquaintance with both sphere of activity, and, if he were indeed physically handicapped, it is the more remarkable that he should have shown so much interest in such strenuous pursuits. It indicates that he had the spirit of the soldier and the athlete, even if he did not have the body, and he certainly carried all the daring and all the determination and all the disciplines of both soldier and athlete into his own Christian life and service, so that he has a right to press upon others the rigors and the endurance of warfare and the games.

But this man, so unsparing with himself, and so bold in his exhortations was considerate of the weak. He would impose extra disciplines upon himself, and forgo legitimate enjoyments, and restrict his own liberties, to help weaker Christians. He lived by the law of love, and called on others also to make that the rule of life. He looked on the weak brother not as a liability, but as part of his responsibility. Practices which his own enlightened conscience would allow for himself were gladly renounced if they made the path more difficult for another.

In our lesson, then, we see these two sides of the Apostle Paul, and of the Christian life. In one portion (Eph. 6:10-20), we have the Christian engaged in total warfare. In the other portion (Rom. 14:19-21), we see the Christian walking the path of peace, not insisting on his own "rights," but ordering his walk with a view to easing the path for those who are weak.

I should like to suggest to the teacher and all others, the reading of Bunyan's "The Pilgrim's Progress" for splendid descriptions of the Christian's warfare—especially the battle with Apollyon. For a somewhat unsatirical but very discerning allegory describing the "wiles" of our Enemy, I recommend "The Screwtape Letters," by C. S. Lewis (Macmillan Co., New York 11: \$2.50).

Verse 11.—"Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." Here we are introduced to the thought of our warfare. We have an Adversary; skilled in tactics, and who will quickly take advantage of any vulnerable point. Compare 2 Corinthians 2:11.

Verse 12.—"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities. . . . Frequently our conflict seems to be with men, but they are merely the tools of the hierarchy of evil spirits arrayed against Christ and His people, under their Captain, the Devil.

Verse 13.—"Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand. . . . to stand." The armor is provided, but it is ours to appropriate it. Thus we shall withstand the shock of battle and, each crisis of temptation over, be found standing in our place in full possession of our post.

Verse 14.—"Stand therefore, . . . girt about with truth. . . the breastplate of righteousness." The word signifies, "Take your stand, in an act of high resolve." Not my truthfulness, but the truth of God (John 14:6), girds me with strength; not my righteousness but the righteousness of God in Christ, is without any think that would expose the heart to the arrows of the accuser.

Verse 15.—"And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace." Modern warfare has demonstrated the importance of footwear against rigors of climate, roughness of terrain, and snake bites. The Gospel of the peace of God offers the best equipment against all hazards of changing conditions; and assures a steady walk.

Verse 16.—"The shield of faith. . . to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked." The great shield, or door-shield, 2½ x 4 feet, is referred to, offering protection to the whole body. So faith answers all the assaults of the wicked one.

Verse 17.—"The helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. . . the word of God." A true experience of salvation is a great protection against the rationalism of unbelief, and the Word of God an effective answer to all the subtle suggestions of temptation (Matt. 4:1, 7, 10).

Verse 18.—"Praying always in the Spirit, and watching to be to the accompaniment of prayer. Prayer itself is a strategic position which must be held at all costs, or there will be defeat all along the line. Prayer that is energized by the Holy Spirit is truly a mighty weapon of offense as well as defense.

Verse 19.—"And for me. . . to make known the mystery of the gospel." A preacher's appeal for prayer support. He seeks their prayer, both that he may have the word to utter, and that he may have freedom in uttering it. Many a preacher would preach better sermons if his congregation so prayed for him.

THE CHRISTIAN'S WAR (Continued)

Verse 20.—"An ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly." To imprison a nation's ambassador is an act of hostility, and would end the ambassador's speaking for his country. Paul refuses to be silenced by bonds, but regards it as an occasion for speaking freely! The chain may be on his wrist, but not on his lips!

Rom. 14:19.—"Follow after the things which make for peace, and. . . edify another." From the smoke of war we turn to the call of peace. The child of God is a soldier, but is called to avoid contention—aiming to build, not to demolish; to help, not to hurt.

Verse 21.—"For meat destroy not the work of God." Especially must we see that our indulgences do not jeopardize the testimony of the Gospel or cause others to stumble.

Verse 22.—"whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak." Here is the law of love which must limit our liberty of action. Indeed, this is the highest liberty—to place restraints upon ourselves for the sake of others.

The Heart of the Lesson
Accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour thrusts us immediately into active combat. For ranged against Christ and His Kingdom is the kingdom of darkness, with its mighty and cunning ruler, Satan, and his ranked followers of fallen angelic beings. Every child of God, every work of God, is a target for these hosts of iniquity. Notice how they are described: principalities, powers, world rulers of this darkness, wicked spirits in the heavenlies. Some have suggested that Satan's "hierarchy" is patterned after that of Heaven with which he is well familiar.

The Christian is so often prone to think that his conflict is with men—and we act accordingly. This is a great mistake. "We wrestle not, against flesh and blood." Men are but the tools of our spiritual foes, and we must learn to fight on the spiritual plane. Many Christians are being defeated because they are fighting on the human plane.

Since our warfare is spiritual, we need spiritual equipment, and that is fully provided. "The whole armour of God" is at hand, and is ours for the putting on—an act of faith. Nothing will brace us for conflict like the truth of God. The Adversary can find no weak spot in "the righteousness of God" through which we may inflict a fatal wound. When the peace of God rules in the heart, the walk will be steady, our feet will not slide. And in our feet are dedicated to carrying the Gospel of peace, we can trust God to keep them from the snares. Let our faith be big, not like the little target of the Scottish Highlander, but like the great door-shield of the Roman legionary. And because

our minds need protection from all kinds of vagaries and false philosophies, let us guard our thoughts with salvation's helmet. For parrying the enemy's thrusts let us practice skill with the word of God, after the pattern of our Lord.

On weapon we have which has no counterpart or equivalent in the Roman soldier's outfit is prayer. John Bunyan makes bold to call it the weapon of All-prayer. If the Adversary can so distract us as to make us forget this weapon, he will have us down in no time. So we must "watch thereunto."

Principalities and powers, Mustering their unseen array Principalities and powers, Wait for thy unguarded hours; Watch and pray.

—C. Elliott
Right here is where we find that our warfare is not just individual. We are part of a great army, and we must fight as members of the host, not just as isolated units. So the weapon of All-prayer is to be wielded on behalf of "all saints." Especially do ministers need this "air support" from the members of the church, as Paul sought it from the Philippians.

Now it would be utter folly to support our comrades with our prayers, and then turn around and wound them with our conduct. So our passage in Romans 14:19-21 tells us how we are to support each other with our conduct, too, in being willing to forgo indulgences which to us may seem legitimate, but which would make a weaker brother lose confidence or fall into bondage. Such "self-denial" will never hurt us. Both we and our brethren will benefit from it.

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