Proper 17 • Ephesians 6:10–20

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major barrier simply by reading the word “submit.” Is this really new with our generation? Given that this was written when marriages were arranged, it’s doubtful that this message was received any more easily by the people in Ephesus. It’s imperative that we not stop here but continue on to see the wonderful relationship established by God with each of us and how that has a direct impact on every other relationship.

The bulk of this passage has as its focus the role of husbands and how they are to love (v. 25ff). “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Here’s where the weight on the shoulders of the husband grows heavier all the way to the point of it being impossible to carry. In verse 28, the obligation is for the husband to love his wife not only for a moment but as a binding and lasting obligation. This means that it is unacceptable for a husband to love to the best of his ability and call it good. Rather, he is to love as Christ loves the church (v. 29). This love Christ has for the church is both a profound mystery and an impossible standard for any husband to meet.

In taking this message to people, it would be wrong to soft pedal the clear message we have about the relationship between a woman and a man. Even the most wonderful husband is an imitator, not Christ himself. As an imitator, the husband is going to fall far short of the standard set by Christ. All husbands will not only fall short here but in every aspect of their lives and must receive forgiveness and be fortified by the means of grace. Our imitation is imperfect but we still reflect the love given to us. How blessed is the woman who sees the reflection of Christ in the man to whom she is married. How blessed are we, in all of our Christian relationships, to see the love of Christ in our brothers and sisters, the body of Christ.

In the Broadway musical Les Miserables, we watch the life of Jean Valjean as he is freed from prison and struggles to reinvent himself and spend the rest of his life keeping a promise to love an orphan girl as his own. As the end of the show arrives, we find Valjean dying and being greeted by the ghosts of the child’s mother, Fantine, and that of another character, Eponine. The epilogue carries with it a message of love, relationships, and forgiveness. Now, in death, Valjean, Fantine, and Eponine join in singing:

And remember
The truth that once was spoken
To love another person
Is to see the face of God.

William Wrede

Proper 17 • Ephesians 6:10–20 • August 30, 2015

The image of the Christian as warrior has become more distasteful in recent years. War-weary people cringe at the classic battle hymns, fearing hymns like “Onward Christian Soldiers” create images of militaristic aggression that don’t fit with the gospel
of peace. However, the hymn presents an image, not of a lone soldier, but of a unified army following Christ in love and charity.

Like a mighty army moves the Church of God; Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod. We are not divided, all one body we, One in hope and doctrine, one in charity. (LSB 662)

This image fits with the picture present in our pericope. Paul does not shy away from military imagery in his letters (2 Cor 6:7; 10:4; 1 Thes 5:8; etc.), and this passage makes it clear Christians are very much in the midst of conflict. Our war however is not with the culture, capitalism, or government, but with the “rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (v. 6). Many sermons on this text move from this realization into an analysis of the armor the Christian is called to put on, perhaps offering a comparison between each physical item and its spiritual counterpart. One must be careful not to push the analogy too far and in so doing miss the importance of the image as a whole. Paul calls the Christian to put on “the whole armor of God” but not to lead the charge. Instead we are called to stand firm. Three times in verses 11–14 Paul calls Christians to stand firm in the faith as they wrestle with the principalities of darkness.

One must remember that we may still be in combat, but the war is already won. Words like “authorities” and “powers” should bring the reader’s attention back to the first chapter of the epistle. Paul makes clear the war is won. Jesus has risen from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Father. There Christ sits “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Eph 1:21). Christians are not called to win a war already won; they are called to stand firm as the final skirmishes are played out around them.

And they do not do this alone. Paul has been at pains throughout the letter to the Ephesians to emphasize the unity of the church in Christ. We are the “body Christ,” “fellow citizens with the saints,” “members of the household of God.” The image may be of each soldier putting on armor, but in the context of the letter as a whole it is hard to imagine one soldier standing alone. One pictures an army standing in unity so no enemy may pass through. The armor these soldiers are wearing is not gained by their own merit, but spiritual gifts they are blessed with (see chapter 1 and following). Their one weapon is drawn at the ready. Paul calls for this sword of the spirit to be used at all times in prayer and supplication.

Some scholars have taken this even further and, given the perceived liturgical nature of the letter as a whole, argue the armor is put on in and through corporate worship. Where better for the people of God to put on his armor and stand together? In the church service we are covered with the word of truth, the righteousness of Christ, presented with the gospel of peace, and pray as one body in the Spirit.

A sermon on this passage, then, might focus on the unity of the body in Christ
together during worship and how we are armored by God to protect us from the “spiritual forces of evil.”

Jason Broge

Editor’s note: The following homiletical help is adapted from Concordia Journal, July 2006.

Proper 18 • James 2:1–10, 14–18 • September 6, 2015

In chapter two of his epistle James warns these Christians about the danger of “head faith.” He doesn’t specifically label it as head faith, but that seems to be what he is referring to. Note what James says in 2:19, the verse immediately following our text, “You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe and tremble.” He’s talking about faith that is based solely on knowledge about God—head faith—but which bears no fruit. Even Satan and his demons have that kind of faith, yet still they tremble. This is not saving faith. They are damned for eternity.

What about Christians? Can a Christian have only this kind of faith? How can you tell? James points to good works as being evidence of saving faith? If one’s faith does not produce good works, it cannot be saving faith. Faith doesn’t show partiality. Faith moves you to love your neighbor as yourself. Faith is active in love. But faith without works is dead. In 2:14 James asks, “Can such faith save?” The expected answer is no. So, a Christian who has only head faith, doesn’t have saving faith, and is therefore not really a Christian at all.

James is not accusing his readers of not having saving faith. He addresses them as “brothers” (2:1). He does this fifteen times throughout the entire epistle. However, certain actions and attitudes prevalent among them caused him to issue a warning about the place of good works in the life of a Christian. They are not immune from falling away. James uses the example of showing partiality to the rich who come into their assembly. He also uses the example of not helping a brother or sister in need. This is not how a brother who holds the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ lives.

As Christians, there is always the temptation for us to be more “head-faith” than “heart-faith” people. We are all sinners whose works and very lives are tainted by sin. The preaching of the law in the sermon should bring the hearers to the point of self-examination, to recognize their failures when it comes to good works. Specifically, in what ways have you shown partiality in the congregation? Have you refused or avoided helping a brother or sister who is truly in need? On the other hand, lest a person think he is full of good works and making progress at rooting out sin, let him hear James 2:10, “For whoever keeps the whole law, but stumbles at one point, has become guilty of all.” In other words, even one sin means we are guilty of breaking the whole law. While works are certainly evidence of a living faith, they will never provide certainty for salvation. That is found not in us, but in the objective gospel of Christ.

This is what is sorely lacking in many churches today with regards to the topic