

HENPECKED CONQUERORS

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Rom. 8:35, 37-39

For a man who didn't start to school until he was 40 years old, Charlemagne the Great did alright for himself. His initial wealth and power came through inheriting the kingdom of Franks from his legendary grandfather, Charles Martel. But he wisely exploited this rather meager beginning and extended that kingdom from the Baltic to the Mediterranean and from the Atlantic (except Spain) to the Slavlands. In so doing, he quite naturally built up something of a reputation as a fearless warrior who performed super-human feats. He became known as the perfect ruler dispensing perfect justice and, as a loyal disciple of the Christian faith, in the year 800, was crowned Holy Roman Emperor of the entire West.

But like all human beings, Charlemagne had his Achilles heel. In a rather colorful biography, Charles Lamb pokes a gaping hole through the conqueror's otherwise shining armor by showing him to be a thoroughly henpecked husband. In fact, the inference is that his wife, Fastrada, a cruel, conniving woman had something to do with his incessant campaigns to distant lands, and the totally uncharacteristic outbreaks of ruthlessness which sometimes possessed him.

It makes a fascinating picture, doesn't it? Taken from the angle of a profile, one sees the shadowy outline of a conquering hero. Owner of vast stretches of terrain. Benevolent ruler of uncounted throngs of the earth's population. But seen from the front, with the shadow torn away, one glimpses the little lines of frustration and humiliation etched there by the constant harassing of his conniving wife, and you know that despite his wealth and power, his pomp and circumstance, Charlemagne the Great -- Emperor of the West, ruler of half the known world -- was a henpecked conqueror.

I wonder if we can bring this historical reference into focus and relate it to our own experience as Christians. Here are we who, through faith in Christ, have become *Amore* than conquerors@. We

have been given victory over death and sin. We have inherited eternal life with all of its consequent benefits. We have been made children of God and thus, are heirs apparent to all of the wealth and power of our Father's kingdom.

We have been given the tremendous resources of the Holy Spirit and, through Him, such rich gifts as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness and self-control. We should, indeed, be more than conquerors. We ought to be the happiest of all people and, in the last analysis, we may be. But let us also admit that when the facade of pretense has been pulled away, and the shadows of religiosity have been removed by the glaring, white light of truth, there are also times in the life of each of us when, like Charlemagne the Great, we too are henpecked conquerors.

In our case, the culprit is not a conniving wife (or tyrannical husband.) Rather, the thin lines of frustration which mar our Christian countenance are drawn there by the constant harassing of

The complexity of the world in which we live.

The competing loyalties which vie for our allegiance.

The conflicting impulses which war within us.

Look at the first of these harassing influences which henpeck 20th century Christians.

The Complexity of Modern Life

Mechanical, industrial, economic, and social Aprogress@ have all taken their toll on Christians, just as they have left their mark upon our entire culture.

Speed has become the watch word of the hour. The average suburban business person has become captive of the 7:31 and the 5:02. They have been so conditioned that if, on their way to the office on a Monday morning, they miss one opening in the revolving door, they feel they're behind schedule all week.

Fortunes are made and lost and made again overnight. Great ships which once took months to

construct are now completed in a matter of a few days. I can still remember sharing in the launching of a 10,000 ton Liberty ship which had been built from the keel up in 96 hours!

This great industrial revolution has contributed to the confusing eruption of population that has beset our metropolitan areas as hordes of people, many unprepared for urban living, descend upon cities like Chicago, looking for economic health and security.

We live in an age of prosperity without precedent, but unfortunately it has been accompanied by self-indulgence without parallel. As a result, the world seems to lack the moral fibre it takes to get off the treadmill.

All around us bewildered, emotionally distraught men and women scurry helter-skelter amid the maddening maze of modern life, searching for that nebulous thing called Asuccess@.

And even though the wayside is strewn with glittering gadgets and gaudy accretions, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is often found to be full of iron. And, when the balance is struck, the result of all this struggle hardly seems to be worth the effort.

In fact, professor John Bailey contends that:

AThere is in the life of every person today a sense of failure, a feeling that idealism has collapsed.@

And because we as Christians must, of necessity, live in this confused and confusing world, we cannot avoid the daily harassment of a complex society. The second influence that drives its pin-pricks into 20th century Christians is the factor of

A Multiplicity of Competing Loyalties.

In the 31st chapter of Genesis, there is the story of Jacob's flight from Laban. In it, you will remember that Rachel, the wife of Jacob, stole the little heathen god that belonged to her father, hoping it would bring happiness and prosperity to her own household.

It was a case of competing loyalty. For a while, Rachel believed in the one true God of Israel, then she floundered in her faith, giving way to the prevailing superstitions of her day. As a result, she was not only guilty of stealing, but of lying. When Laban came looking for the missing idol, Rachel, who had hid them in her camel saddle, claimed to be sick and unable to move so they could not search her tent. Two grievous sins...lying and stealing...were committed because she fell prey to the siren call of a false loyalty.

I think there's a lesson here for us. We, too, are surrounded by a bevy of enterprises, interests and organizations which compete for our loyalty. The loyalty we owe, first, last and always to the Christ whose captive we are. For as Paul declares in I Cor 6:20, we have been Bought with a price@ and we belong to the buyer!

We might call these competing attractions Loyalties junior grade,@ for while they are good, stimulating, even edifying, they are definitely second class. They are A little god-s@ 20th century style. And, when we allow them to take preeminence in our lives, we are just as guilty of idolatry as Rachel was. And what is more, the results are just the same.

Idolatry always leads to other sins. Perhaps that's why the first commandment is:

A Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.@

God knew that when we give our loyalties to the A little gods@ of life, we will soon be guilty of lying to ourselves. We seek to argue ourselves into believing our mis-spent loyalties are not mis-spent at all. We attempt to convince ourselves that our lives are counting just as much for God and good as if all our concern and ability were going into the cause of Christ through His church.

Yes, and God also knew that if we sell out to second-rate loyalties, we are soon guilty of stealing too. The stealing, misuse, misappropriation of the precious time, energy and resources which belong to Him. Now, don't ask me to name these Loyalties junior grade.@ While I could, I won't. I learned long ago that none of us wants to hear a sermon on sin. We just want to hear sermons on sins we don't do!

Like the parishioner who was listening to her pastor preach. When he spoke about gambling, because she didn't gamble, she let out a hardy "Amen!@. When he turned his attention to the subject of drinking, again, because she didn't drink, she let out another "Amen!@. But when he started to speak about gossiping, she turned to her husband and said: "He's quit preachin' and gone to meddlin'@.

You see, there are some questions we must answer for ourselves and the question of loyalties is one of them. It isn't a hard question to answer. Exclude the legitimate loyalties of earning a living, going to school, caring for a home, and then take stock of your life by asking:

AWhere do I place my loyalty?@

Do I give it to the work of Christ or to...?

Do I give it to the hour of power on Wednesday night or to...?

Do I give it to the Sunday school or to...?

Do I give it to the great world mission program of my church or to...?

Do you see what I mean? You alone can answer the question for yourself and answer it you must. For being a Christian does not make you immune to being a henpecked conqueror. Harassed by a multiplicity of competing loyalties junior grade, you and I must decide whether our loyalties will go to the "little gods of life@ or to our Lord who bought us by the giving of Himself. And then may I speak of that third harassment which henpecks Christians today.

The Conflicting Impulses Which War Within us

Paul had never met the psychologist William James, but He was well aware of the inner conflicts of human nature. He had never heard of Freud or Jung. But He was intimately acquainted with the turbulence of human desire. In the seventh chapter of Romans, He puts it this way: "The things I want to do I don't do, and the things I do not want to do I do, Oh wretched man that I am.@"

The apostle James speaks of the same problem when he says: "What is the cause of the fighting

which goes on among you? Is it not to be found in the passions which struggle for the mastery of your body?@ (James 4:1, 20th Century Version).

Both of these ancient New Testament writers were discussing the factor which modern psychologists are now claiming to be the source of so many of our personal and social problems: The untamed impulses of human nature and the Awild horses@ within us that sometimes run amuck.

And this is a problem for all of us. Becoming a Christian does not change the fact that we, like every other Mother=s child, came into this world with a powerful set of urges, instincts, impulses (or whatever you wish to call them), that are the driving force of life. The things which make us tick. And the major business of life is learning what to do with ambition, fear, hate, anger, lust, and oh, so many other Awild horses@ within us.

In fact, that=s what Christianity is all about. This Christian faith of ours does not stick its head in the sand, ostrich-like, and say these common harassments in life do not exist. Our Christ was not so blind as that. He was fully conscious of the warfare within us. He knew as J. Wallace Hamilton points out in his book Ride the Wild Horses,

AWhat is true in the realm of plant life is true also in the realm of human life...that is, every weed is a potential flower and the very qualities which make it a weed can also make it a flower. The same instincts that made a Judas could also have made a John. Jesus knew that. He knew that within every sinner is the stuff of which saints are made, and so He said to the people He saw struggling against the pin-pricks of life, >Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me...for my yoke is easy and my burden is light=@ (Matt. 11:28-30).

I don't think I ever fully understood the meaning of that verse until this last summer when I heard a man on the radio refer to a New Hampshire farmer who was driving a pair of oxen. As they rolled along behind the plodding animals, he turned to his friend and said in his deep New Hampshire accent: 'That yoke sure rests easy on those oxen.' As I flicked off the radio, I said to myself: 'That's it. That's what Jesus meant when He said, 'My yoke is easy.' He meant that it fits and, thus, is easy to bear.'

Complexities of Life

It fits our need with respect to the complexities of life. You see, my friend, this yoke was meant to be worn by two. Christ and you. Our Lord is fully cognizant of the tremendous pressures which weigh us down and He is anxious to help us lift the load if we will only let Him...if we will but link our lives in tandem with His and wear His yoke which is 'easy'.

Competing Loyalties

And what is more, the yoke of Christ fits our situation with regard to the competing loyalties which vie for our allegiance. The Christian yoke is a good deal like the yoke of Christian marriage. In fact, Jesus often used the relationship of a husband and wife to illustrate the spiritual union between Himself and those who call Him Lord.

This matter of loyalty is much like falling in love. If you fall in love with surface things, a pretty face or form, an attractive bank roll or some superficial physical characteristic, if you go into marriage because it's 'the thing to do', that relationship is headed for a peck of trouble. It is based upon 'junior grade loyalties' and some day a new or more attractive face or form or bank roll will come along and steal your so-called 'love' away.

But if you fall in love with a person, then in time, the surface things take care of themselves. Like the wife who came to her husband and asked: 'Honey, will you love me when my hair is turning gray?' He said: 'Well, darling, I've loved you through three other colors; I guess I can stand one more!'

You see, if you are loyal to the church because it's the thing to do...or because it's a worthy Aproject@...or because you like a particular pastor...or because you think everyone should put a shoulder to the wheel and help push the only thing that can stop the progress of Communism...then you are in for a hard time of it. These are second-rate reasons for being part of the church and shortly, some other Aproject,@ or socially acceptable Aclub,@ or Aworthy cause@ will come along and you will go spinning off to spend your loyalties on your newest second-rate loyalty.

But if you are in the church because you are in love with a Person, if at the very center of your loyalty is the Lord Jesus Christ, then it will be Aa contest.@ The Aloyalties junior grade@ will chafe and rub, while the yoke of Christ will rest easy upon you.

Conflicting Impulses

And need I say that His yoke fits our needs with regard to the conflicting impulses within us? Our Lord is so well aware that we are a tragic mixture of sinner and potential saint. But the glory of Jesus is that He meets people where they are and treats them as if they were where they ought to be. And wonder of wonders, as we allow Him to place His yoke upon us and thus take direction of our lives, we discover to our joy that He had lead us wisely through the jungle of good and evil.

Yes, we are Aa more than conquerors through Him that loved us,@ and even though there are times when we are henpecked by the complexities of life, the competing loyalties around us and the conflicting impulses within us, if we will but stop and give a listen, we will hear Him say:

ACome unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will
give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me...for my
yoke is easy and my burden is light.@"

What I have tried to say to you this morning is best summed up in a few lines of happy doggerel which are not very good poetry, but make very good sense.

A We mutter and sputter,
We fume and we spurt.
We mumble and grumble,
Our feeling get hurt.
We can't understand things,
Our vision grows dim.
When all that we need
Is a moment with Him.®