

Put Away Your Sword

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In John chapter eighteen, the arrest of Jesus is documented. The apostles, save one, and Jesus crossed the brook of Kidron and went to the Garden of Gethsemane. Earlier in the evening, Judas had arranged for Jesus' arrest. A group of Pharisees and temple soldiers confronted Jesus.

The tension of this meeting must have been palpable. Twice Jesus asked who they were seeking. Both times, Jesus identified Himself as the man. Jesus told the soldiers to take Him and let the apostles go free. Then, Peter struck. He took his sword/dagger from his side and sliced off the ear of the high priest's servant, Malchus.

Peter might have been a fisherman by trade, but he also was skilled in the use of his sword. It would have taken precision to what he did. But, what did Peter think would happen after his action? Was Peter hoping to create a violent scene and rescue Jesus? Was Peter prepared to die to save Jesus? Instead, Jesus rebuked Peter, calmed the situation, and surrendered Himself to the hands of the Pharisees.

This scene set into motion a series of legal proceedings that would end in the crucifixion of Jesus. Darkness and chaos would descend. Three days later, a new resurrection day would dawn. Salvation would be offered to the world. While this is the primary significance of the events of the garden, we will focus on Jesus' statement to Peter: "...Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" (John 18:11). Jesus' words have important meaning regarding the nature of His purpose and fit into the Biblical theme of new creation.

Lessons from the Garden

1. Jesus' earlier rebukes of the apostles. Jesus once asked the apostles who they thought He was. Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the son of the living God (Matt. 16:16). Then, for the first time, Jesus told the apostles of His death (Matt. 16:21). Jesus would go to Jerusalem, turn Himself over to the rulers, die, and be raised the third day.

This was astounding to the apostles. Peter rebuked Jesus and said that he would not allow this to happen to Jesus. Then, Jesus rebuked Peter. Next, Jesus told the apostles, "Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 16:24-25).

Jesus did much more than indicate His future death. He expressed the meaning of discipleship. To follow Jesus, we must sacrificially deny ourselves. By restraining our impulses and sacrificing our ambitions, we learn the true meaning of discipleship. Jesus was demonstrating this in the garden.

There was another time when James and John came to Jesus seeking power. Surprisingly, Jesus redefined power. The Romans used power to oppress. Jesus would redefine power. Power is self-giving love: "...You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45).

These two earlier rebukes of the apostles correspond to what was happening in the garden. Jesus was demonstrating self-denial and self-giving love. He was beginning to drink the cup that no one else could drink. His surrender in the garden would lead to Him giving Himself as a ransom for many.

2. Putting away our swords. Jesus had to surrender to the Jewish leaders and die because Jesus was a different kind of king. Jesus expected power to be used to serve because Jesus' kingdom was a different kind of kingdom. Jesus wanted Peter to put his sword away because combat would be done differently to advance Jesus' kingdom. Jesus would later tell Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world" (John 18:36).

Violence has no place in the kingdom of God. Disciples who use violence only demonstrate an untrained heart. Paul, a man who was well acquainted with violence, would later write, "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:3-4).

3. A different method of fighting. Peter was in the process of learning a new method of fighting. Peter did not realize is that Jesus was dying to save both him and Malchus. If Peter was going to serve Jesus, his heart had to change.

Christians are to use a different method of fighting. Fighting for Jesus is not motivated by hate, but by love. The sword we wield is the word of God. We are not to use this sword to oppress, humiliate, or self-promote. By love, we must skillfully use the sword of the Spirit to change hearts and minds. We are not seeking to crush our enemies, but to make them our family.

Conclusion

Peter's impulsiveness is obvious to us. We are not surprised by his actions or by the words of Jesus. Yet, we often do not recognize our own impulsiveness, irrationality, and harshness. We live in a society where incivility is rewarded. We must resist such un-Christ-like behavior. Such is antithetical to the Kingdom for which our Lord died.

As Christians, we are to be cultivating the society of the new heavens and new earth (Isa. 65:17-25). In this place, the instruments of warfare are changed into farming implements.

Swords are instruments of death. Plows are instruments of life. Jesus did not come to destroy life. Jesus came to save life. May this settle deeply in our hearts and transform our view of our neighbor. The time has come to put away our swords.