

The Kingdom's Rules of Engagement

In just a few hours [moments] we will conclude the baptism of Shiloh Paluso saying to this newborn daughter of God, "We receive you into the fellowship of the Church. **Confess the faith of Christ crucified**, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in the royal priesthood of all his people." Before her hair dries from holy water, she's commissioned for Gospel witness in the world: confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, share in his royal priesthood. She's set apart for Gospel witness with the sign of the cross anointing her forehead. It is a contradictory symbol—a sign of weakness **and** victory. "Fight bravely under the banner [of the cross] against the flesh, the world, and the devil." These are the first words every newborn daughter or son of God hears after the Lord baptizes them in his death and resurrection. Every apostle the Lord commissions for Gospel service he sends in weakness, promising his ultimate victory.

"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves,"¹ Jesus said. A side note: anytime Jesus says 'behold' in the Gospels, that means, 'pay close attention here.' So behold, Jesus sends his disciples as *sheep*. Sheep

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Mt 10:16.

are vulnerable, they are the target of wolf predators, they cannot survive without the shepherd's protection. Sheep are weak.

Jesus could have chosen any animal to represent the leaders of his Kingdom. He chose sheep. He does not send his disciples into the world as lions, tigers, or bears. The Kingdom of God sends weak and vulnerable sheep. They cannot outlast their adversary with natural strength. They arm themselves not with visible weapons, but with spiritual weapons—wisdom and innocence. “Wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

I want to meditate on this peculiar Gospel commission and how we understand weakness and power in the Kingdom of God. That's the topic for today, but first we have to consider a more basic question from Jesus' opening words. If you belong to Jesus—if you live as a sheep in the fold of his Kingdom—do you live as a **sent** disciple? Search your heart and ask: am I embracing or rejecting his commission?

I look with sadness on the days when I've sought to do my will, to establish my own pitiful kingdom instead of serving God's kingdom. I've refused his commission even with the collar on. /

You know how to verify that you're refusing his commission? You live free of conflict for days on end. If

you're evading conflict for self-preservation, or because you don't want to upset anyone, you might just be refusing Jesus' kingdom commission. Christians should experience conflict and confrontation in their lives because ***we desire the strongholds of the Enemy to fall***. That conflict may occur in your vocational life, but it's just as likely to appear in friendships, even the members of your own household. Jesus told us to expect as much. / But always remembers what St. Paul said about these conflicts: 'we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.'

So faithfulness to Jesus' kingdom means we should experience conflict in our lives. Conflict means we are engaging the stronghold of the Enemy.

Now let's return to Jesus' words to his sheep. Jesus prepares his disciples for the greatest crisis they will face. He's preparing them for a confrontation that exceeds every other conflict, *the* defining moment of their lives. A firefighter trains for all kinds of fires and blazes, but their training will be most tested when a structure is fully involved, or when they contend with backdraft. Likewise

Jesus trains his disciples for the greatest test of faithfulness —when their very lives are at stake. /

It may help to read these instructions to disciples as **rules of engagement** for future conflicts. Every conflict follows certain rules of engagement. But the rules of engagement in Jesus' kingdom do not seem to make sense. Here's a brief outline of Jesus' rules of engagement when the disciples meet their adversaries.

- ◆ Remember who you are: sheep in the midst of wolves
- ◆ Practice wisdom and innocence
- ◆ Do not prepare words ahead of time
- ◆ Listen to the Holy Spirit
- ◆ Do not fear
- ◆ Endure to the end

Those are the rules of engagement in Jesus' kingdom. I can only imagine how this passage would sound in the secular literature on leadership. On the surface of things, this seems to be the perfect example of bad leadership. Who sends sheep in the midst of wolves and then tells them to trust their innocence? And then 'do not fear' and 'endure to the end?' Isn't a leader supposed to empower those in his care? These rules of engagement go against all conventional logic of power and effectiveness.

And that is because the Kingdom of God will not bring down strongholds through conventional power and effectiveness. Roman power and efficiency nailed Jesus to the cross. But on that cross Jesus 'disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them.'² The cross upon which Jesus died was transformed from a sign of **weakness** to a symbol of **power** and **victory**. Three days after he died on the cross, the Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead. Ever since the day of resurrection, kingdoms have risen and kingdoms have fallen, yet the saints have taken up the cross for 2000 years. The wisdom of the cross, the weakness of the saints, the power of the Holy Spirit—these are the rules of engagement in the Kingdom of God. Vulnerable sheep need not fear any adversary.

Interestingly, I have been an adversary for a flock of sheep in my life. When I lived in northern England, my favorite place to vacation was the Yorkshire Dales. One morning I set off in my Volkswagen Polo (a cozy little hatchback) for the higher passes and moors of Swaledale. I came upon an ordinary scene in that country—a flock of sheep blocking the road. Having studied the teachings of Jesus about poor, helpless sheep I got out of VW to scatter

² [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Col 2:15.

the sheep so I could be on my way. To my surprise, they had no fear of me and looked emboldened to challenge me. Strength in numbers I suppose. I felt sure they would scatter if I feigned a charge, but the opposite happened. They stood their ground and began to encircle me. I did not know the biting habits of sheep and I had no smartphone to Google the question at the time. Humiliated, they forced me back into my VW. So sheep can be quite bold in the face of an adversary.

You know we can walk in boldness, even in our weakness? Our Good Shepherd has given us his Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead, then we can trust the Spirit to empower us in the midst of our weakness. No matter what weakness besets you—whether physical, mental, emotional, relational—the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. God called Moses *with his stuttering speech* to bring down the strongholds of Pharaoh. Monica was a mother who watched her son live a rebellious life, suffering for years in prayer. But the prayers of Monica brought her son, St. Augustine, to faith in the Lord. Mother Teresa wrestled with spiritual darkness for years while serving the poor of Calcutta. Oswald Chambers experienced deep depression and nearly entered a mental institution. There are countless stories just like these. This is

the Kingdom of God, where the Holy Spirit empowers the saints in the midst of weakness to bring down the Enemy's strongholds.

You know what I find interesting about Jesus' words on the moment of critical confrontation? He tells his disciples, 'do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour.'³ In one sense, Jesus is saying 'don't prepare ahead of time,' yet *he prepares them for this critical moment*. He trains his disciples to *not trust in their own strength*. He tells them to wait for the Helper, the Paraclete. He prepares them to depend on the Holy Spirit. Both in his words of instruction and even more by his example of abiding in the Father, Jesus trains his disciples to find true power in the the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, not in their own strength. /

Many of you know I trained for the Knoxville Marathon last April. That training experience has illuminated spiritual lessons for me and I share one here if for no other reason than giving Emily some more company to endure my running analogies.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Mt 10:19.

I'd never run a marathon, so I needed a lot of help in the weeks of training. On my own I didn't know how to condition my legs to endure 26 miles. Thankfully I have a friend and fellow pastor, Wil Cantrell, who lives down the street from me and he took me under his wing. Wil has run the Boston Marathon and will run the New York Marathon this fall. He's crazy good. And he was literally my running paraclete.

One of the most important workouts to prepare for the race is what runners call a fast-finish long run. This means you'll run 20 miles or more and *accelerate your pace* the final 4 miles or so. And try not to throw up. As painful as this sounds, you have to simulate fatigue and weakness in these workouts to endure the dreaded Wall on race day.

So Wil offered to pace me for the latter half of a fast-finish long run. I'm managing fairly well until we get to the final 5-6 miles and Wil starts to pick up the pace. I feel my heart rate pick up, my breathing becomes a bit more labored. Then we get to the final 2 miles. I feel like I have a refrigerator on my back and I can barely feel my legs. I'm look to Wil for comfort and say, 'I'm fading, Wil.' He says, 'You oughta be.' Ok, so we keep running even though I can't feel my legs. A mile left in the workout and the weakness in my legs is screaming. Again, I'm hoping for comfort from Wil. 'My legs are on fire, Wil.' 'They oughta

be. Just keep your legs moving. This is getting you ready for race day.’ So we keep running and in that final mile he encourages me little by little until I finished the workout.

When race day came, I felt that same fatigue in my quads on the James White Parkway. When I reached Island Home Boulevard my quads were a fully involved inferno. But I knew the weakness was coming. I could hear Wil’s voice ‘You oughta be weak now. Just keep your legs moving.’ And what do you know that voice—the voice of my running paraclete—carried me through the Wall. I didn’t finish strong, I couldn’t keep my pace the final 3 miles, but I finished because my coach empowered me through the weakness.

Every difficulty, every micro-trial, every adversity becomes training opportunities to trust the power of the Holy Spirit. I must learn the sound of the Paraclete’s voice in smaller moments so I can recognize it when the greatest trial, the most critical conflict, comes across my path.

You and I have been charged to ‘confess the faith of Christ crucified and proclaim his resurrection.’ We speak these same words to newborn daughters and sons of Christ’s Kingdom. So lean into your weakness, whatever that may be. For when you are weak, then you discover the power of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit who brings down

strongholds and renews people of all nations. And that is the glory of God whose Name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.