

# Swords!

A SERMON ON MATTHEW 10:24-42 AND ROMANS 6:1-13

*Now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our rock, and our redeemer.*

When I first looked at the Gospel reading for this morning,  
I my first thought was  
“let’s see if there is anything else the lectionary has scheduled...”

I don’t usually shy away from difficult passages

- maybe you wish I would -

but I’ve *already* preached on the whole

“I haven’t come to bring peace but a sword” bit - *twice*.

Once relatively recently.

I didn’t want to do it again.

So I thought, “I’ll just focus on the other readings”

But I kept coming back to this passage

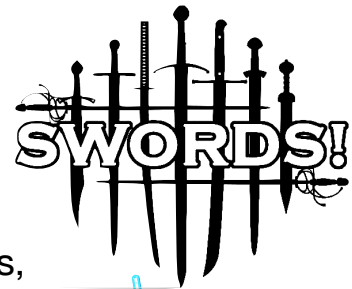
Then the obvious struck me.

(obvious in my opinion anyway)

Swords are kinda awesome.

Long swords, broadswords, arming swords, falchions,  
cutlasses, claymores, ...lightsabers

“an elegant weapon of a more civilized age”



As I was talking about with the kids,  
the sword evokes this King Arthur type of mystique.

Courage, Honor, Gallantry,  
and did I mention slaying Dragons?

Now, I’ll grant you given the history of say, the Crusades,  
I understand why a lot of people are uneasy  
about any relationship between religion and sword.

But I think something important can get lost in an outright dismissal of  
something that is a rather recurring theme in the pages of the Bible.

I also think that using the lens of fantasy and fairy tale  
can help us understand what Jesus is talking about,  
even if no one in the first century AD had yet read Lord of the Rings



## Swords!

or even heard of the knights of the Round Table. And that is precisely because these fantastical stories often play into some cosmic battle between Good and Evil, or at least Vice and Virtue.



The sword Jesus mentions also belongs to a battle that has these transcendent dimensions.

As it says in Ephesians,

“we fight not against flesh and blood,  
but against the powers of this dark world  
and against the spiritual forces of evil  
in the heavenly realms”

In the passage from Matthew we read, Jesus is still preparing the apostles he is about to send out for how difficult their task is going to be, for the opposition that often accompanies Christian mission. Opposition even within families.

Christ mentions these divisions specifically, and they can be the most painful. But there are plenty of people who don't want Truth, don't want to know God, don't want dark secrets brought to light, even as there are those who do.

A mission of peace - absolutely. But peace is a tricky thing. In the fourth century, John Chrysostom notes the discrepancy with how Jesus is portrayed in other passages and explains it like this:

“How then did Jesus enjoin the Apostles to pronounce **peace** on entering into each house? And again, how did the angels say, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth **peace**?... Because this more than anything is peace, when the diseased is cut off, when the mutinous is removed. For thus it is possible for Heaven to be united to earth. Since the physician too in this way preserves the rest of the body, when he amputates the incurable part;



## Swords!

and the general,  
when he has brought to a separation them that  
were agreed in mischief. For concord is not in  
every case a good thing,  
since even robbers agree together.”



What Chrysostom often uses the metaphor of physical health and sickness to describe spirituality as he understood it. So, if the sword thing isn't working for you, there are other options.

And even within this Gospel reading, we see that part of this spiritual warfare comes in the form of simply offering a cup of cool water. I saw a meme recently contrasting on one side, an extremist take on what it is to destroy evil, using this verse about Jesus bringing the sword to dehumanize kill those who they judge un-Christian. That whole approach strikes me as un-Christian.

On the other side it showed what destroying evil actually looks like, saying “I forgive you.” Praying for enemies instead of being conquered by hate.”

This is true Christian spiritual warfare,  
not to lash out against physical enemies,  
though sometimes that might be called for,  
but to fight against one's own impulses that lead to your being enslaved by sin,  
and if it works for you cosmic forces of evil, Satan, demons.  
Thinking in this way can really help see greater significance in everyday battles.

That's what Paul was talking about in our reading from Romans.

In chapter 6, verse 13 the worship leader read:

“Nor must you surrender any part of yourselves to sin to be used for wicked purposes. Instead, give yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life, and surrender your whole being to him to be used for righteous purposes.”



And here we have today's installment of  
**“that's not what the Greek says”**

## Swords!

The NRSV comes closer,  
at least keeping the structure of the sentence intact:

“No longer present your members to sin as **instruments** of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as **instruments** of righteousness.”

But that word translated as instruments (hopla) isn't referring to pianos and saxophones, nor any less anachronistic musical apparatuses. (though that itself is kind of a beautiful thought)



Hopla can mean instruments in the sense of **tools**, but that still is not how I immediately took it.



In its earliest meaning this word referred to the large shield carried by heavy foot soldiers, actually giving those warriors their name of hoplites. It then came to mean their weaponry in general. I glanced through the entries in four different lexicons of ancient and biblical Greek, and and all the words compounded with hopla were related to weaponry.

In modern Greek, the word for weapon is the the related hoplo. It is rather strange to me that nearly all modern translations go with something like “instrument” while maybe mentioning that it might mean weapon in a footnote.

Early commentators not having to deal with translations certainly understood this verse to be referring to spiritual combat, and what they say about it is worth looking at:

Chrysostom: The body, like a military weapon, is not in itself inclined to either vice or virtue. It can go either way, depending on the user.... The flesh becomes either good or evil according to the mind's decision, not because of its own nature. Homilies on Romans 11.<sup>121</sup>

Pelagius: Every part of the body can become a weapon of wickedness which will defeat righteousness if it turns its purpose to bad use. At the same time, note that it is by freedom of choice that a man offers his members to the side of his choice. Pelagius's Commentary on Romans.<sup>122</sup>

## Swords!



Both of these writers stress the agency of Christians in choosing which side they want to be a weapon for and the potential to use one's body as a force for spiritual good. (while acknowledging that one can choose the opposite)

In the Gospel, we began with Jesus telling his Apostles that it was enough for the student to be like the teacher, and according to Paul we are in this position of having to choose which side to lend our arms to, because we **are** like our Teacher, Christ.

Part of this reaches back to humanity being created in the image and likeness of God, but Paul stresses how through baptism, we have been further united to Christ specifically, in ritually having “been united with him in a death like his” so that “we will certainly be raised with him in a resurrection like his.”

I know we normally emphasize baptism as something of a spiritual bath, but Paul's understanding goes deeper, as a dunking in water can be a sort of dying and rising again. And this frees us. We are allowed to choose.

Think of yourself as that brave sword wielding knight, and choose well, just remember what fight it is you're in. Not one against other people so much as one for the well-being of your own soul.

*Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*