

“Schwarzenegger and the Bride” Col 3:12-17

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

I never thought that I would share this with you, not on a Sunday, not in a sermon anyway. But here it comes. You know how young people choose their role models, their source of inspiration, we often call them idols.

When I was of similar age as our boys are now, I had posters on my wall. Of a very famous athlete. I guess most teenage boys and young men at that time had posters of that particular man on their walls. Can you guess who it was?

Yes, the famous Arnold Schwarzenegger. Yes, I did it. Guilty as charged. See, Arnold was different. Very different. The way we saw him – he stood out. He offered another path, a very attractive one for us boys.

But do you know why we had those posters? Do you know how those posters functioned? It is quite interesting, and it certainly is worth understanding it. They gave us a future vision – this is what strength and commitment, and success and fame look like. It can be you!

All the things that we used to dream about at that age. That was our vision! But that was not all. This future vision actually inspired us for action. You don’t get to achieve your future vision by laying down on the couch and eating chips.

In our case, those posters, and everything they symbolized, inspired us to train hard, to push ourselves, to discipline ourselves, to say no to some things and to commit ourselves to others. I have to say, they were very effective.

The future vision that they gave us transformed our lives, it filled them with a certain meaning as we aspired to bring this vision to fulfillment. The truth is, none of my friends became exactly like Arnold. Not even close. But our lives were changed, undeniably and mostly for better.

“Okay, pastor, nice memories. A bit funny. But why to share this now?” Because we, I mean Christians, have been given quite a few such “posters” by the Holy Spirit, and one of them we encountered today in Paul’s letter to Colossians.

What do I mean? This is what Paul gave to our fellow-saints, and to us as well. A poster, so to speak, a beautiful, amazing vision of what the Bride of Christ, what the Church of Christ should be like. Let’s take a look at it!

Now, imagine that there existed this community where all of the following was true. Those people had wonderful compassionate hearts, which manifested in loving mutual care within that community and also far beyond it.

They were so kind. Truthfully kind. Not just polite on the surface, like putting on a mask, but driven by deep compassion, genuine respect for fellow humans and a desire to bless others. They were humble, there were no ambitions or power struggles, everyone tried to consider others as more important than themselves.

They were abundant in works of love and service, but seldom anyone would find out about what they had done, for they didn’t do it to show off, but quietly so that “their left hand wouldn’t know what their right hand was doing”.

Their relationships were amazing. They were patient with one another, recognizing that they all had different struggles and different temptations to battle with. More, they were bearing with one another, encouraging one another, offering their help and heartfelt prayers for one another.

Genuinely interested in the wellbeing of one another. But no, they were not perfect people. Not at all. There were situations when they had very good reasons to complain against each other. But what was so surprising and unusual – what they did when that happened.

They didn’t hesitate to ask for forgiveness, when they had sinned against one another, or hurt one another. They cherished peace and good relationships more than their pride and desire to be right by all means.

They were quick to forgive too, even if sometimes it was a costly forgiveness. They had this amazing power, this amazing ability to ascend above their emotions and our natural sense of fairness and entitlement, and to be abundant and gracious with their forgiveness.

Loving one another in the deepest sense, valuing and caring for one another as for themselves. These attitudes led to wonderful harmony in their community, they had countless reasons to be thankful, and thankful they truly were.

More than that, they were passionate about listening to their Lord Jesus Christ, they were always curious and excited to discover the treasures of God’s wisdom and grace and not only for themselves, no! They were passionate to share this beauty and divine joy with others.

Thus, they lived building one another up by the Word of God, fellowshiping in this incredibly attractive community, standing out from the rest of society, shining gloriously, rejoicing in their new life, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, blessed and uplifted by the grace that was given to them.

How does this sound? Do you recognize this poster, this vision, that the Holy Spirit has displayed before us? This is the Bride of Christ, this is the Church of Christ, the most blessed fellowship of God chosen and beloved saints.

This is such a beautiful picture that the Holy Spirit has given us. That is a picture of who we are intended to be as God people. This is our poster that should attract us, that should stir up our hearts and move us to action.

Do you recognize in this picture our congregation, does this sound just like our congregation? But, of course... Can you finish the sentence? Or course, not, or of course, yes? What do you think? I believe it is both, yes and no.

Yes, this is you, dear brothers and sisters. This is a hundred percent you! This is what your Father and your brother Jesus intended you to be. And, by God's grace, from time to time we can witness and experience glimpses of this beauty also in our congregation, in our relationships, no doubt about that.

But on the other hand, surely, this picture of the Bride of Christ painted by Paul is pretty much like those Schwarzenegger posters were for us. It is our future vision, but it is also something very hard to achieve.

But there are some very important differences. In that case, trying to achieve the ideals embodied by Arnold Schwarzenegger, all of that depended on whether one succeeded or not. If you made it, you got it, but to make it, one would need to sacrifice more and more and more...

That is how all idols work. They tempt, they promise, they demand and demand, and at the end, they never deliver. And this is where the key difference becomes so clear. When Paul writes these beautiful instructions, does he say that if, and only if you make it, only if you live that way, then you will get something? No!

This is where God's grace meets us. This is what the Spirit says, this is how He addresses you: "You, God's chosen ones, God's holy ones, you, God's beloved!" This is who you are already now. The greatest gift, the greatest prize, the ultimate gain, all of that is already yours. This is who you already are.

We could say that for us, as the Bride of Christ, this whole future vision and inspiration thing works the other way around. First, we receive all the abundant gifts of God, He makes us His own, adopts us as His children, He embraces us as His beloved, He makes us His eternal heirs, and only then...

Only then He instructs us: "Now, when you have been so much forgiven, when you are so much loved and cherished, when I have made home with you and filled your

heart with my peace and joy and eternal hope, this is my vision for your life – go and live out your new identity boldly and beautifully, with grateful hearts!”

Therefore, when we strive towards such amazing life, towards such wonderful communal life, we are not compelled to do it by what we may acquire if we succeed. Instead **“whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”**

Isn't this beautiful? Isn't this liberating? This is what God's grace looks like. It manifests itself in such beautiful and harmonious fellowship of God's people as Paul painted for us in his letter.

Sure, from time to time you can hear someone in their sinful foolishness and sluggishness objecting, trying to justify their own apathy and laziness, that we are saved by grace alone and don't need to worry about good works.

Of course, we are saved by grace alone! But what are we saved for? Not to continue in our old lives. The Spirit Himself answers this for us: **“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”** (Eph 2:10) This is God's answer to us.

See, God's grace doesn't end with saving us from sin and death and devil and not even with saving us for good works, as Paul described them. His grace continues with us as we strive to build such a beautiful community.

You know from your own experience how satisfying it is to strive to live according to that “poster” that Paul painted for us. How joyful, how meaningful, how uplifting for you as individuals, and then – what a community is being built when we strive to live that way! Outstanding. Attractive. Beautiful.

The best witness to the world. The most beautiful, the most attractive community. I pray today that the Holy Spirit who has given us new hearts, would never cease to amaze us with the vision of the Bride of Christ, that we too would long to pour out our life to make that vision a reality.

Not to merit anything, not to gain God's favour, but out of gratitude and quietly giving thanks to God the Father for everything He has already done for you.

May our Triune God bless us richly so that outsiders could look at our congregation and be inspired just as we were inspired by the posters of Arnold Schwarzenegger: “Wow, look at these people, look at this beautiful community, we want what they have, we want to be like them!”

May this be us! Please, grant this to us, Father!

Amen.