Chivalry: The Warrior Code of the Middle Ages
World History Lecture Notes

What is Chivalry?

Some people say that chivalry is dead, but most don't even understand what chivalry is. When most people use the word today, they use it to describe someone who is nice. A chivalrous man holds doors for women, pays for dinner and a movie, and yields his seat for a lady. That is certainly part of chivalry, but the chivalrous man is not only someone who is a nice guy, in fact, there are some people to whom the chivalrous man is the opposite of nice! A chivalrous man can sometimes be downright brutal, as when Rep. Preston Brooks beat Sen. Charles Sumner mercilessly with a cane in the United States Senate chamber in 1856 after Sumner had insulted his state and a member of his extended family. How is it that a chivalrous man can be so nice, and yet so brutal? The answer lies in chivalry's medieval origins.

The Warrior Code of the Middle Ages

As the Roman Empire was being torn apart by barbarians in the fifth century A.D., the barbarian culture began to merge with the culture of the Romans as these tribes began to adopt Christianity. As the unbridled barbarian ferocity began to be tempered with Christian teachings, the idea of knighthood began to develop. The term, chivalry, comes from the medieval French word, *cheval*, meaning "horse." In the High Middle Ages, this Code of Chivalry was a guideline for knightly behavior both on and off of the battlefield.

The Values of Chivalry

Leon Gautier, a nineteenth century literary historian and scholar of chivalry, laid out ten "commandments" of chivalry to illustrate the values of a chivalrous knight:

1. **Christian Orthodoxy** – a unwavering belief in the teachings of the Christian religion
2. **Defense of the Church** – a willingness to defend the Church and Christian holy sites, which was best illustrated during the Crusades
3. **Defense of the Weak** – coming first to the defense of women, children, and the elderly
4. **Love of Country** – illustrated in loyalty to one's feudal lord and king
5. **Courage in the Face of an Enemy** – ferocity in battle without regard to one's own life or safety
6. **Show No Mercy Toward Infidels** – no mercy for those who deny Christ or break their word
7. **Faithfulness to Duty** – doing what one is expected to do for family, Church, and country
8. **Honesty / Keeping One's Word** – a knight's word should be the equivalent of signing in blood
9. **Generosity** – charity and almsgiving toward those who are incapable of supporting themselves
10. **Defense of Just Causes** – a knight is not a mercenary, but an instrument of justice in the world

Sir Bors' Dilemma

The ideals of chivalry are well-illustrated in the story of Sir Bors, one of King Arthur's legendary Knights of the Round Table. Sir Bors had to choose between saving his brother and saving a young lady who had been abducted. He chose to save the young lady (though he also said a prayer for his brother's safety).

Chivalry Today

Today, chivalry lives on not only in gentlemen who hold doors for women and pay for dinner, but also in popular entertainment. Batman is often referred to as the "Dark Knight." While Batman does not have a reputation for being a nice guy, he commits himself to protecting the weak and when Batman does harm, it is to those who have done harm to those who are weak and defenseless.