

At one point in his career, Chuck Colson was a man with a reputation for being hard-hearted and power hungry, and this resulted in him ending up with a very powerful job - the top legal and political advisor to the president of the United States.

Colson was known as the “hatchet man” for President Nixon. Sometimes he leaked stories to the newspapers to damage a political enemy’s reputation. He was a deeply patriotic man though, and believed that helping the president was helping the country.

The early 70s were a tough time to be president. American soldiers were dying in Vietnam, fighting a war that wasn’t all that popular. And even though the war started before Nixon took office, he was sharply criticized for it. Daniel Ellsberg was one of the men who had helped draw up plans at the beginning of the war. Then he was saying our country’s involvement had been poorly planned.

The president thought that these reports, known as the Pentagon Papers, could put American soldiers in danger and hurt secret talks going on with

China. So he ordered Colson to pass on information to the news media that would make Ellsberg look bad.

What Colson didn't know was that two other aides, Howard Hunt and Gordon Liddy, had broken into a doctor's office where Ellsberg had been a patient. They also had arranged a break-in at the Democratic party's offices in the Watergate building. There they planted spying devices to learn what the Democrats had planned in the presidential campaign. Colson learned about the Watergate break-in on the news.

Several months later, Gordon Liddy and the five burglars were charged. The White House tried to cover up its wrongdoing and announced that the burglars had acted on their own. It secretly paid the men "hush money" to keep quiet and pressured the FBI to limit its investigations. But reporters found out and also learned about the break-in at the doctor's office.

Colson went back to being a private lawyer, while Nixon won a landslide to a second term in office. A Senate committee investigated the Watergate scandal throughout 1973 and into 1974, which snowballed leading to the resignation of Nixon.

Into all of this, Colson's name came up again. The media accused him of being behind the Watergate break-in. No one seemed to believe he was innocent. Soon he too was under investigation. Exhausted from all the pressure, he went to visit one of his clients who had become a Christian. The man told Colson how Christ had changed his life. He challenged him not to let his pride keep him from finding peace.

Colson was moved by this, and within a few weeks, he decided to give his life over to Christ. Reporters got wind of it, and he was made fun of in cartoons across the country. People would gossip about him and say he had not really changed and that he was just faking in order to get sympathy so that he wouldn't be sent to prison.

But the conversion was authentic, and one of the things Colson wanted to do as a Christian was to be completely truthful. He pleaded guilty to an offense he hadn't even been charged with - passing out negative information to the press about Daniel Ellsberg.

He went through some rough times as a new Christian. He was worried about the stress his family was under. He was afraid of being put in a prison with men who were there because of laws he had helped pass. Many of his old friends no longer wanted to be seen with him. But a group of Christians did stand by him, even men he scarcely knew and men who had been political enemies. They believed in him and encouraged him.

He was eventually sent to a tough prison in Alabama, Maxwell Prison. He had once worn expensive suits and influenced the president; now he wore a poorly fitting uniform, ran the prison's washing machine, and slept in a room with 40 other men, including rats and cockroaches. Other prisoners didn't trust him because he had been a government official. He was told it would be safer to not get involved with prisoners, but Colson actually started a prayer group with other prisoners because he missed Christian fellowship.

One day a prisoner warned him he had an enemy in the prison who wanted to kill him. Colson realized that only God could protect him. A short time later, he saw two men walking toward him. He heard a voice say inside of him, "Now, Chuck," so he went up and talked to them. One was a former

policeman who had been sent to jail for something he had not done. He thought Colson was responsible. Colson explained the investigation had come from the Justice Department, not the White House. He also told the man that he knew what it was like to be a political target. The man shook his hand, and he knew the danger was over.

Colson would often lead the other Christians to pray for fellow prisoners, and they saw wonderful answers to their prayers. There were times when he actually praised God for being put in prison where he could be used.

When he was released, Chuck finished writing a book he'd started in prison. The book described the way Christ had changed his life. He wanted to do more, but he wasn't sure what exactly. He'd had several promising business offers. He could no longer practice law in Virginia, but he might be able to in Massachusetts. There was also the possibility of doing some kind of prison work, but he wasn't sure he could bear to go back inside a prison.

The answer came to him as he was shaving one morning. He decided he would start an organization to train prisoners so that they could start Christian fellowships in their prisons. In the meantime, his book "Born

Again” was published. It became a bestseller and was made into a movie. Now he received invitations to speak at Christian events throughout the country. He used his speaking fees to help pay for his new organization, which he called Prison Fellowships.

But he also did something brave that was hard for him to do, but he knew he had to do: he went into prisons to speak. At times this was nerve-racking; in 1978 for instance he went into a violent, overcrowded prison in Atlanta. He was warned there could be trouble. The prisoners were angry. The prison was also sweltering.

As he stood in front of 800-900 prisoners, Colson nervously told them what Christ had done in his own life and what He could do in theirs. He told them Jesus could make them free even while they were in a lousy prison. When he finished, the room erupted in applause. Men stood on their chairs, cheering and clapping. Many men accepted Christ that night, including a former Mafia member known as “Joe the Butcher.”

By the end of 1994, 50,000 volunteers were involved in Prison Fellowship. Care Committees were started to support families of prisoners. And each

Christmas, hundreds of thousands of children of prisoners receive presents through the Angel Tree program. Prison Fellowship also continues to offer marriage seminars for inmates and their spouses and support groups for ex-prisoners.

Colson died in 2012, but Prison Fellowship goes on, largely in part due to the fact that it's founder knew that he couldn't just say "I believe" but he had to, as Paul says, bear his share of hardship for the Gospel with the strength that comes from God.

Paul was not a lawyer, but like Colson, he was in prison. He may have written this letter from prison in fact. And he reminds us of the hardships he's had for the Gospel; he speaks of being beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked, in chains, left for dead. Writing to Timothy who is much younger, it comes across as advice from a wise man with experience, that Timothy too will have to follow his footsteps. But Paul, like Colson, kept going after he had his encounter with Christ. So, how about us? How can we be brave in the Christian sense of the word?

Fortitude is the virtue that helps us through tough times and to fight our spiritual battles. And for all of us, how much we need it. Because daily, we go into battle; hence the prayer of Saint Michael the Archangel that used to end Mass. We go out to try to grow as Christians and to be people of hope who change this world for the better.

A starting point is with ourselves. How often ego can take over; we can become powerful, perhaps in the sense like Colson did rising up the career ladder, but powerful in other ways too, such as having power at home, at work, on a committee. After a certain age our parents aren't telling us to do this or that anymore. But our conscience hopefully is, if we form it right. Colson if he played his cards right may have been able to avoid prison; remember he learned about Watergate on TV, and fessed up to a crime he wasn't even charged with. But this was because he got introspective; he knew the starting point was himself. To be truly free, he had to lay the cards of his sins on the table. It is indeed hard to look at ourselves and say "here's where I sinned" or to look at areas we need to grow in in our lives, to say gee maybe I need to be a better husband or wife or parent or son or daughter; to say I've ignored this too long and need to make this right. But true growth comes from first admitting we have got more growing to do.

Second, we remember as Paul says that the Holy Spirit dwells with us; and that God has given us power, love and self control. Colson was surely afraid at that moment when he saw the big burly ex cop headed his way, but he prayed and he knew God was with him in prison. In his darkest hour, Jesus prays in the garden and an angel comforts Him. We are never orphans. It's so important to pray when we face tough moments. If you're tempted to commit a sin, pray for strength. If you're thinking about do I need to confront this person or situation, pray about it. If you're going into the doctor for some big tests, pray. While we still face tough situations and they don't go away, we must remember through it all, God is standing with us every step of the way.

Third, we need to go into battle at times like Colson did. He could have kept his faith quiet and maybe survived prison, perhaps gone back into business. But he knew God had other plans for him, which is why he went back into prisons even though it was triggering fear, and why he'd do difficult things. In our lives, we face tough situations. "Catholic Answers," a great Catholic apologetics website, cites a few examples: Maybe your adult child has wandered from the faith. Maybe someone you know has decided to get married in a context you and your faith tell you are wrong. What to do? Or

maybe you're at work and a clear injustice has occurred in the office. But, if you try to remedy it, you may be persecuted or lose your job. Should you fight it? Sometimes we want to run from these situations; other times just go in right away. But Fortitude helps us to think something through and deal with it appropriately. Sometimes other people blackmail us with their fear too; they are passive so we can "go with the crowd" because it's not good to upset the apple cart. But this is not the way of the Christian. Josef Pieper, the German Catholic Philosopher, said we can't let fear paralyze us, but rather use it's energy to attack evil. In his words you don't allow yourself to be forced into evil by fear, or to be kept from fear by the realization of good. You "walk straight up to the cause of fear" and do what is good. As Christians, we need to do what Colson did; develop a kind of "fearlessness" that allows us to feel fear without it getting the best of us. This helps us avoid the trap of saying "Well I better not get involved, I'll just hurt their feelings" or "It'll damage our relationship." Remember cowardice is a vice against fortitude. Now this does not mean that we do not endure suffering or bear wrongs patiently as the spiritual work of mercy. Sometimes it really is best to keep silent; but this typically comes after we've engaged first. You say something and are ignored; a person seems to not be open to change. In these cases, we show patience, another spiritual

work of mercy; we pray for the person; we try to set a good example; we stay a part of their lives. We discern when another opportunity down the road may come up to try to help them. This too can be a hardship if you think about it, because it might be easier to just trying to force someone to change, but this often requires patience to eventually help someone to see the truth.

And lastly, never forget how we together bear hardships. Colson started alone, but now Prison Fellowship has a number of people on staff and who volunteer, and helped inspire many other prison ministries such as the one we have here at Saint Joe's and in our archdiocese (and in fact we're having a major event here in just 3 weeks with the Archbishop coming for Mass). Working together, so many good things can happen. You take our Harvest Festival; it's been such an honor to work with Jordan Ecker as she coordinated and planned the festival with the help of other staff and a committee. But it's been a true labor of love; the time and planning she has put in have done so much, but it hasn't been easy. Yet in my 7 1/2 years here at Saint Joe's, I've never heard much complaining from anyone; people truly love our parish and work so hard to help it go forward. So too must we remember we are never alone. We turn to others from raising a

family, to having a sit down or intervention with a loved one to help them see they need to make some changes, or taking a stand against injustice. Paul and Timothy are coworkers as are the others - so let us seek people out to help us in our task to live out the Gospel and set the world on fire.

Being a disciple isn't easy, but when we, like Paul and Timothy, opt to not run away from the difficult work, be it evangelizing, saying "no" as a mom or dad, or putting in the long hours to support a family or volunteering to make a difference, we use the tools the Spirit has given us to make an incredible difference in our world, and take the steps to God's Kingdom. As we prepare to receive Communion, let us take to heart what it means to say "Amen" to receiving our Lord, and with Him, go into the world, bear our hardships, and make a difference.