

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Ephesians 6:10-24

"The Battle"

There's a battle going on. Paul was quite clear in the 1st century that God's great plan to reunite and "*reconcile all things under Jesus Christ*" was opposed by dark forces, and things don't seem to have changed much since then. What part should the community of believers play in the battle?

After all Paul's talk of reconciliation between people and God, Jews and Gentiles, people in the church, families, workers, it comes as a surprise to find all this military metaphor in his final passage in Ephesians - until you begin to examine it in detail. What emerges is that the Christian community's role is not to go out and attack God's enemies, but to "*be strong in the Lord... and stand firm.*" Their role in the battle is essentially defensive: to hold on to the territory that God has won in Jesus for his kingdom, and not to "fall back." To do this they will need the equipment that God provides.

Because the battle is a spiritual one, so is the equipment. The opponents of God are the "rulers and authorities," "the powers of this dark world," and the "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Much debate has centered on whether these are primarily corrupt earthly forces, or unseen spiritual ones - the best answer seems to be "both." Of course Paul does not see all authorities as evil (e.g. Romans 13), but he does know that some of them are "on the dark side."

1) *The Equipment of the Christian Soldier*

So Paul evokes the metaphor of the armor of a 1st century Roman soldier - with which he was undoubtedly familiar as a prisoner of Rome - to describe how God outfits his people. Some of this he also borrows from Isaiah's picture of "the LORD as warrior."

To stand firm, Christians need the belt, the breastplate, the sandals that in his picture stand for truth, righteousness, and the peace the gospel brings. "Truth" here is not so much what we know of God, but the faithfulness and loyalty we have to Christ. "Righteousness" is not so much the "righteousness of Christ" that follows from "justification by faith" in the life of the believer; rather their righteous actions that Paul has spent the second half of his Ephesian letter talking about. The "gospel of peace" is of course a strange piece of defensive armor, until you realize that this is precisely what God's opponents want to disrupt - peace with God and peace within the community which the Gospel of Jesus brings.

Loyalty, right living and peaceful relationships are the very things Paul has reminded the Christians that they should strive to maintain in their community. But then he names three items of spiritual equipment that are direct gifts of God and to be "received": the "shield of faith," the "helmet of salvation," and - the only offensive weapon - the "sword of the Spirit

which is the word of God." Faith and salvation are the great securities that God provides. With those gifts, the Christian soldier is reassured that he or she cannot be defeated – these are his shield, and her helmet. And the gift of the word of the gospel, made sharp and effective by the Spirit, is the Christian's only weapon against the foe.

Moving away from the military metaphor, Paul reminds the Christians how they get all this armor – *by prayer*. Literally this paragraph runs "stand firm.... put on God's equipment... receive from God his security and his word... through prayer." "*Pray in the Spirit on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests... stay alert, and keep on praying for one another.*" There is no other way of receiving what God offers in Jesus than by Spirit-inspired prayer. Talk to God, tell him your need, allow him to equip you for life and the battles you face. Paul even asks the Ephesians to pray for him, so that he will be enabled to preach the word, the gospel of Jesus, "*fearlessly as he should.*"

2) *The Battle Today*

So what about the battles we face? Do we even know we are in a battle? Do we have any sense that this Christianity is not a child's game, or a set of pretty stories with morals attached, but a real conflict between good and evil that includes us – individually and collectively?

Now to evoke "spiritual warfare" gets some people very exercised and others very confused. Some hate military metaphors, and would argue that Christianity is all about forgiveness, loving your enemies and "turning the other cheek." So *Onward Christian Soldiers* and other such hymns have been banished from some hymn books, or reworded until they are unrecognizable!

Other people would say that all this talk of "spiritual forces of evil" is sheer nonsense; a relic of a superstitious age when demons and evil spirits were supposed to be everywhere – so witches used to be burned or drowned – but "now we know better." I am reminded of C.S. Lewis's words in the mouth of the deceiver in *The Screwtape Letters*, that one of the devil's devices is to make popular images of him unbelievable. But any sane observer of the modern world must conclude that even after the evil done by the "principalities and powers of this world" is accounted for, there remains a strong sense that there is more to be said – that behind people's dark behavior lies a power that at times we cannot resist calling 'demonic.' So to conclude that "spiritual evil" does not exist, or on the other hand that there are demons everywhere, both seem inadvisable at least.

What Christians have always believed is that Christ in his death and resurrection and exaltation decisively defeated the spiritual powers of evil. So what remain are lurking, defeated, tethered forces of darkness, which nonetheless are still capable of causing great trouble in the world and in the community of God's people. It is precisely withstanding their attacks that Christians are called to in their "life in the world." God's purpose of reconciliation is still under attack, and the Church is called to defend itself and God's world against those attacks.

Where is the battle being fought today? If we lived in some parts of the world we would discover that persecution for reasons of faith is still common. People in those situations really need the assurance that God is their protector and refuge. But we know little of that. Let me cite a few attacks that are still frequent in our culture.

One is *division*. God's plan to unite all people and all things "under Christ" is constantly attacked in the world and in the Church.

Racial, class, political, national divisions are all around us. For Christians these pose a special problem, because our first loyalty is supposed to be to Christ and his Church, and not to anything else. "Caesar" may have to get his dues from us as citizens of his kingdom as well as of the kingdom of God, but when the crunch comes and the battle lines form, we are called to be Christians first and Christians last - not Americans or Brits or Caucasians or Asians or Republicans or Democrats.

And of course parochial divisions within the church should be seen for the devil's work that they are, as are angry divisions in families or workplaces. As Paul says, "*do not give the devil a foothold by your persistent anger*" - whether you are angry with your spouse, other Christians, the President or the Congress.

I would also cite *defamation* as a modern attack - Christians in our culture may not be persecuted, but they and their beliefs are defamed. The so-called "New Atheists" are not only making money from their book sales, but are trying to stir up animosities between people by their rhetoric. Even Christians fall into the same trap, using language that is specifically designed to rile people and get them on the street. But public anger does not achieve the righteousness of God; it is the tool of terrorists, insurrectionists and dividers.

Distraction is another battlefield for Christians today. Go back 25 years to Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*; he argued that Aldous Huxley was right in *Brave New World* - written in 1932! - in imagining a society addicted to entertainment. We are now distracted not just while driving, but 24/7, wherever we are, by "electronic noise," which stops us

thinking clearly, talking to anyone else, let alone praying. If you want a vivid picture of our distracted society, especially among young people, read a modern (or rather, post-modern) author like David Foster Wallace (e.g. *Infinite Jest*) and his numbing depictions of lives shaped by endless technology, entertainment, sports, drink, drugs, violence and bureaucracy! Wallace understood the distracted despair within this culture so well that he did what it can lead people to - he killed himself.

And of course we still face the "flaming arrows," as Paul called them, of temptation, doubt, untruth in modern forms. Now you may dismiss all this talk as "academic hand-wringing," the kind of stuff you read on the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times* - but it is real, it is in our lives day by day, it is part of the culture we live and breathe. And the worst thing about it, as one commentator on Ephesians wrote, is that "*evil rarely looks like evil - until it has accomplished its goal*" (B. Witherington). Paul would agree that the devil is cunning, a great deceiver, and Christians have to see through and stand firm against "*his schemes*."

Do not be fooled, or distracted; stay alert, pray at all times, for everyone. Remember that God's people are secure in God's hands, protected by the salvation and the faith he gives; but they are called to "*stand firm in the strength of the Lord*" against all attempts to distract believers with unimportant or divisive matters. Watch out especially for people who want to provoke you into anger against someone else.

"*Blessed are you peacemakers*," according to Jesus, because you are contributing to the Father's plan of reconciling and reuniting "all things." But as Jesus also implied: "peacemakers will be attacked from all sides!" Christians are supposed to stand firm, stand together, armed with God's

defensive armor, secure in Christ's victory and in God's final purposes, and equipped by the Word, the Spirit, and prayer to hold the ground that God claims for his kingdom.

May we together stand firm in peace, harmony, reconciliation, and so be a pleasure to our Lord and a weapon in his hand against his enemies.

Let us pray...