

Wrestling the Forces of Darkness

Scripture Text: Ephesians 6:10-20

Introduction

What are the hallmarks of being a disciple of Jesus Christ? Actually, there are many. We have discovered that some characteristics of discipleship include prayer, Bible study, fellowship with a church, loving and serving others. Could one distinctive quality of a disciple of Christ be fighting? Perhaps that is strange to suggest. You may think that once we become disciples of Jesus Christ that we are to put away *worldly desires* like fighting, and you would be correct. However, there is an element of fighting in the Christian life. Like David, every one of us at some point in our lives will have to stand and face a Goliath. The moment you decide to step out of the crowd and follow Jesus Christ, not only as a disciple but also to publicly declare the gospel to a lost and dying world, you enter a battle zone. You will meet your Goliath who hates everything you love and is determined to hinder anything of godly significance. Just last week, we read about the effects of selfish desire and how to resolve conflict that results from it. That can be a Goliath to many of us. We all have different Goliaths: some of us struggle with pride, others with greed, some lust, some fear, some low self-esteem, some depression, and some self-righteousness. What is your Goliath? To battle these Goliaths, we have to trust in Christ, prepare for battle, and live out the gospel in reliance upon Him.

Do Not Give Up in Doing Good

Have you ever felt like giving up on something? Maybe it was getting too hard to do something. Maybe you had not seen the results you had wished to see. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not easy. If anyone says that it is, then something is not right. The truth is that Satan does not want God's people, the Church, to be effective. Satan does not want us to prosper, and I am not talking about prosperity like the world defines it. I am talking about being an effective and faithful servant of Jesus Christ. If the Church is effective, if we are doing what we should be doing, then we are a threat to Satan. He wants to destroy God's work here. If we are *not* following Christ faithfully, then why would Satan bother us? Therefore, Paul often encouraged disciples to remain strong and to persevere. For instance, look at what he wrote to the churches in Galatia.

Galatians 6:9 And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

It is hard work to do good, meaning, to serve God in His kingdom. We can grow weary from the constant attacks from other people, the lack of support from our family or friends, the feeling of being ineffective, or the discouragement of results that we had not imagined. After all that Paul had written in his letter to the church in Ephesus, like reminding us that salvation is by grace through faith and that we ought to stick together in the unity of the Spirit of God, he then wanted to leave them with a final word of encouragement. Paul wanted to close the letter with a final statement that would strengthen their faith as they lived out the gospel. Look at the verses below.

Ephesians 6:10–11 ¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.
¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

Paul wrote: *Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.* This saying is reminiscent of God's encouragement to Joshua just before he led the Israelites into the Promised Land. God told Joshua, "Be strong and very courageous" (Joshua 1:7). Joshua had a big job to do and he needed strength and courage to do it. God wants us also to be strong. He wants us to persevere. However, it is important to realize from where (or whom) our strength comes. This strength and empowering does not come from within us, but from outside ourselves. It comes from the Lord. There is something, though, we can do to strengthen ourselves. As an athlete will train and exercise his or her muscles, disciples of Christ must exercise their spiritual muscles. We must exercise our faith through prayer, scripture, and communion with one another. You will never be strong enough on your own. If you tell yourself that you are strong enough without God, His Word or His people, then you will not be prepared for battle. We have to be strong in God's strength because we fight a powerful enemy. Verse eleven reminds us of whom we are fighting, which leads us to the next point.

Know Who You Are Fighting

Knowing the enemy is critical to win any war. I have to remind myself of that many, many times. It is so easy to focus on the wrong thing or the wrong people, saying that is the problem or they are the problem. I have often pointed to the wrong person or thing to explain some problem or battle I was facing. We need to stay strong in the Lord in order to stand against the "schemes of the devil". These schemes play out in many ways. It may be false teaching. It may be personal attacks. It may come in the form of discouragement. Paul reminded us that our fight is *spiritual*. Look at the next verse.

Ephesians 6:12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

We do not fight against flesh and blood, although that is what it often seems to be. We actually wrestle against dark, spiritual forces that are intent on doing us harm and destroying the good that God is doing through us. That is not to say that evil does not use physical means. People who are led by the spiritual forces of darkness become *pawns of Satan* and will cause all sorts of trouble for God's children. Satan is a mean one. He wants to destroy what God is doing in you. He wants to destroy what God is doing through you. He wants to destroy you. Scripture tells us that the Devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking to destroy us (1 Peter 5:8). He will even use you to execute his schemes against other people. These spiritual forces of evil are very powerful, and yet scripture makes perfectly clear that the enemy is no match for the Lord, who has "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (Colossians 2:15). Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might! But, how do we do this? That leads to the next point.

Be Ready and Prepared for Battle

It is one thing to say we should stay strong in the Lord. It is also another thing to say it is His might that gives us strength. But, how do we stay strong in the Lord and the strength of His might? To fight against the powerful enemy, we have to become prepared for battle. For instance, to go into battle, a soldier would need to put on all of the necessary equipment to effectively fight the enemy. The same is true for our military men and women today. While the equipment may have changed, the need to be equipped and ready for battle has not changed. It is foolish to send our men and women into battle without the necessary equipment to fight the enemy. The same is true for the Church. Disciples of Jesus Christ need to be equipped and ready to fight the evil forces of Satan. Because our enemies are superhuman spiritual forces, we cannot rely upon mere human resources. We must use supernatural resources. We cannot battle the forces of darkness unless we are equipped with God's resources. As soldiers in God's army, we have to put on the *whole armor of God*. Look at the next verse.

Ephesians 6:13 *Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.*

The word for "whole armor" refers to the complete equipment of a fully armed soldier. Paul portrayed Christians as soldiers in the battle line holding fast against an enemy's charge. We can do this because God has not left us defenseless. It is important to realize that our "battle clothes" belong to God. It is His armor that He is giving us to wear. Wearing someone else's clothing is not unique to this passage. Paul wrote to the Romans, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh" (Romans 13:14). Jesus told His disciples, "Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). In this passage, to put on God's armor means to be empowered by Christ. With God's battle gear, Paul charged the church to "stand" firm (vss. 11, 13, 14). We do not go looking for a fight, but we are to stand firm and resist the enemy's attacks. "Stand therefore" meant to "hold your ground against the enemy". To do this, to hold our ground against the enemy, we need to wear the Lord's armor. So, what is this armor of God? For that, let us briefly look at the following verses.

Ephesians 6:14–17 ¹⁴ *Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness,* ¹⁵ *and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.* ¹⁶ *In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one;* ¹⁷ *and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,*

The whole armor of God consists first of the *belt of truth*. The soldier's belt was what held his armor together. Our confidence in God's Holy Word and His promises to us keeps us together. Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44) and he cannot stand against the truth. We are also to put on the *breastplate of righteousness*. Like a breastplate of armor, disciples are protected by the righteousness of Christ, which is imputed to them when they trust in His saving grace. With it, they can stand up to the Devil's accusations

and trust that God is conforming them into the image of His Son. We are to have *shoes of readiness*. A soldier's sturdy sandals gave him stability and protection in battle. The gospel gives us peace to stand firm and to proclaim the gospel of peace. We also have a *shield of faith*. Burning arrows were designed to destroy wooden shields and other defenses and would threaten the security of a barricade. Therefore, a shield would be soaked in water before battle to defend against these flaming arrows. The shield of faith not only catches Satan's flaming arrows, his lies and evil schemes, but it extinguishes them. The best defense against Satan's attacks is to have complete trust in God.

We also have the *helmut of salvation*. This might be called the helmet of victory, such as God's victory is His people's salvation. A soldier's helmut protects his brain. Since the primary battlefield in spiritual warfare is the mind, the assurance of our salvation defeats the doubts of Satan. The spiritual nature of the church's resources is nowhere more plain than in its reliance upon the *sword of the Spirit*, which is God's Word. This is the only offensive weapon mentioned in the list of spiritual armor. The Word of God is to be wielded like a sharp two-edged sword, in the mighty power of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 4:12). The Word of God does not here refer to preaching the gospel, but to defending against a foe. Think of Satan's temptation of Jesus (Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13), in which Jesus defended against Satan's attacks by using scripture. The same is true for us. When Satan tempts you to sin, or entices you to turn away from Christ, or discourages you in some way, or compels you to quit doing good, use God's Word to repel his attacks and remind him of God's promises. Paul mentioned one more thing we must do to engage in spiritual warfare and put God's whole armor to use. What is it?

Stay in Constant Communication with God

Imagine that you are a soldier on the battlefield. You have all of the resources of the military. You are equipped and ready to fight. There is one problem, though. What are your marching orders? What do you do when you need to call in reinforcements? Communication is essential in warfare. Soldiers have to be able to receive orders and to communicate information and requests for things they need to their commanding officers. For the disciple of Christ, prayer is also essential. It is communication with our Commander in Chief. It is the medium for receiving our marching orders and the means for calling in reinforcements. This passage could very well be a message on the need for prayer. There could be a whole sermon from this passage on the Christian soldier's need to pray. Because we cannot stand on our own against the forces of darkness, we must rely upon the strength of the Lord's own might, which He supplies chiefly through His Word and prayer. Prayer is essential in our Christian walk. I am most vulnerable and powerless and discouraged when I have been out of communication with God. Put simply, to engage in spiritual warfare, we must pray. Look at the next verses.

Ephesians 6:18–20 ¹⁸ *praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,* ¹⁹ *and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel,* ²⁰ *for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.*

The battle is spiritual. The weapons for warfare are also spiritual. Therefore, our fight must be rooted in prayer, which is the Christian's most powerful resource. Prayer and the Word of God are the main weapons of spiritual warfare. Each piece of armor must carefully be put on with prayer, drawing upon God's divine resources. Last week, we read where James wrote that we do not have, because we do not ask (James 4:2). We should ask God for what we seek, and when you are fighting the spiritual forces of darkness, you will need to seek God. Not all prayers are pleasing to God, though. Sometimes, when we do ask for something, it is with the wrong motives. We should pray prayers that are *consistent with God's will* as revealed in scripture. Rather than seeking to honor God and advance His kingdom purposes, some prayers seek only to satisfy our own self-centered desires. So, what did Paul say about prayer here?

For one, we must pray *at all times*. We must be constant in prayer. We must pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). We cannot go without communicating with our Commander in Chief, our Lord and Savior. To be effective, though, our prayer must be *in the Spirit*. Praying in the Spirit is praying under the Spirit's influence and with His assistance. Praying in the Spirit is an admission of our ignorance and our dependence on God. Our prayers have to be Spirit-led or they become petitions of selfish desires. We must also pray *for each other*. As disciples of Jesus Christ, the Church, we are in this battle together, therefore, we need to pray for each other. Satan will try to divide us and get us focused on all the wrong things. Therefore, pray earnestly for one another. Lastly, we must pray *for the proclamation of the gospel*. The reason the Church exists is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. That is the mission of the Church. To do that, though, we must proclaim and live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul was, we too are ambassadors of Christ. Therefore, are you praying to share the gospel with others?

Conclusion

In closing, there is a real battle going on. There are dark, spiritual forces at work trying to destroy you and the work of God through you. The enemy is real and he wants to destroy God's Church. Are you prepared for battle? Or, are you discouraged, beat down, and ready to quit? Do you feel defeated? The good news of the gospel is that God does not want you to give up. His Word tells us to be strong in Him and to trust in His might. The battle has never been won by us in by our own strength, but we are in a fight. We just have to use spiritual resources, like trusting in Christ, putting on the whole armor of God, and staying in constant contact with Him. God wants to empower you by His might. He wants you to be courageous and ready for battle. Did you notice that there was really nothing to wear on the Christian's back? Of all the parts of the whole armor of God, there is nothing really to protect the Christian's back. That is because God expects no deserters in His army. When we put on the whole armor of God, we are preparing for battle with the enemy, and we are saying that there is no turning back. We are standing firm. Therefore, be strong in the Lord. Do not give up. Trust in Him and pray at all times. This is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen!