

Be Strong & Stand Firm (The Armor of God)

Ephesians 6:10-17

February 5, 2017

In the introduction to his classic book, *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis writes, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors.”¹²

Before we dive into our text about our spiritual enemy, let’s take a few minutes to review where we’ve been in our study of Ephesians. Back in Ephesians 1 we recall Paul’s beautiful opening doxology of praise. God had a plan for humankind before the creation of the world; He predestined us for adoption into His family. He planned to redeem us and lavish us with His grace in accordance with His pleasure and His will. But, our enemy, the devil would like us to be estranged from our Heavenly Father. He’d like us to forget our glorious adoption.

Back in Ephesians 2 we learned that we’ve been rescued from spiritual death and we’ve been seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. God expressed His kindness to us in Christ and saved us by His grace through faith. We are now God’s handiwork. But, our enemy, the devil would like to enslave us once again in sin and disobedience. He’d like us to walk in the ways of the world again and gratify the cravings of our flesh. You see, the Grace Community that we have been learning about in the book of Ephesians has an enemy.

In Ephesians 3 we learned that God has reconciled Jews and Gentiles into one body, the Church. We have been rooted and established in Christ’s love. The Church displays God’s manifold wisdom. But, our enemy, the devil mocks the church, and the wisdom of God. He enjoys firing his flaming arrows of controversy between Jews and Gentiles. He can’t stand any kind of unity in the church! Ephesians 4 calls us to live lives worthy of the calling we have received. We’re urged to put off our old self and to put on the new self. We were told to walk and talk as the Grace Community that God intends for us to be. But, our enemy, the devil, he much prefers our old selves. In fact, he’d like every Christ-follower to return to their old ways and their old patterns. It’s so much more fun for him when Christ-followers stumble in their Christian walk. He enjoys hearing Christians lie and talk dirty. You see, the Grace Community that we have been learning about in the book of Ephesians has an enemy.

In Ephesians 5-6 we are challenged toward purity and innocence. We’re told to be very careful how we live in these evil days. We’re given instructions about husbands/wives, children/parents, and bosses/employees. We learned to embrace healthy-functioning, God-honoring relationship structures. But, once again, our enemy, the devil wants to attack God’s people. He wants to take away our innocence. He finds pleasure in filling our minds with impure thoughts. He enjoys ruining marriages and families. Stress and discord in the workplace make his day so much better.

Well, we don’t want to look for the devil under every rock. Our own sin natures make enough trouble on their own. And, we live in a fallen world which contains some dysfunction. But, the fact is, there is a cosmic perspective to our faith. We are living in the midst of a spiritual struggle between good/evil. And our enemy is very real.³ Today’s text is the crescendo to which Paul has been building in the first 5 ½ chapters.⁴ Everything that we’ve been learning about Christianity in the book of Ephesians so far, will only be protected and enjoyed, if we follow the admonition of Ephesians 6:10-17. Following Christ, calls us to stand firm in our spiritual struggle.

One of my favorite old riddles goes like this: “What is something that poor people have but rich people need? It’s greater than God and more evil than the devil. And, if you eat it, you will die.” There is NOTHING greater than God and that’s the riddle’s answer. Ephesians 6:10 begins, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.” Our spiritual struggle requires spiritual power. We are not expected to contend against the devil using our own strength. Ephesians 6:10 uses a passive verb, “be strong.” In other words, “be strengthened” in the Lord. It’s about HIS mighty power.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1960, p. 9.

² John R. W. Stott writes that the devil “is at his wiliest when he succeeds in persuading people that he does not exist.” *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, IVP, IL, 1979, p. 265.

³ It’s worth noting that when the Apostle Paul is writing to the Ephesian believers, he doesn’t give any background info on who the devil is or where he came from. (See John R. W. Stott’s discussion on p. 261 of *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, IVP, IL, 1979.) Rather, he just assumes that the Ephesian Christ-followers are all already up to speed and that they understand that the devil certainly exists and that he is a current and real threat in the world. Paul launches directly into God’s plan for how to overcome the spiritual forces of evil.

⁴ See Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 457.

We learned about his mighty power back in Ephesians 1:18-21:⁵ “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know...his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength 20 he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, 21 far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.”⁶ So, as we read Ephesians 6:10, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power,” it helps us to reflect back. As we take our stand against the devil, we are strengthened in the Lord’s mighty power. And it’s not a small or insignificant power, it’s the greatest power out there.⁷

And our God is seated in the heavenlies “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.” Let’s keep that in the forefront of our minds as we move to the next verse. Watch this.

Ephesians 6:11-12 says to, “Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” This lines up nicely with Ephesians 1:21. “Christ has already triumphed over these powers. But they’re still active for a short while longer.”⁸ The battle is ongoing even though our enemy’s ultimate doom has already been sealed.⁹ Our spiritual struggle is against a spiritual enemy.¹⁰ And even though, through Christ, we clearly have nothing to fear, that’s not to say the devil has no power. We should understand 3 things about our spiritual enemy. First of all...

1) Our spiritual enemy has Real Power. Jesus Himself calls Satan the “prince of this world” in John 14:30. In 1 John 5:19, the Apostle John says, “... the whole world is under the control of the evil one.” The devil has already been defeated at the cross, but he has not yet conceded defeat and he has not yet suffered his final destruction; that is still to come. Therefore, he continues to exercise a limited authority in our world.¹¹

The 2nd thing we should understand is that...

2) Our spiritual enemy uses Evil Schemes. Note the plural form of the word “schemes,” which suggests that the devil’s spiritual attacks can happen multiple times and they can take a variety of forms and approaches.”^{12 13} The devil is a schemer. Ephesians 4:27 has already warned us how the devil can use anger to get a foothold. 2 Corinthians 11:14 says, “... for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.” Satan may try to fool us but we are well aware to watch out for him as a wolf in sheep’s clothing.¹⁴ “We must not imagine, therefore, that open persecution and open temptation to sin are his only or even his commonest weapons; he prefers to seduce us into compromise and deceive us into error.”¹⁵ So, I wonder, which scheme might the devil be working on in your life right now? Which flaming arrow has he recently shot in your direction? And, most importantly, is your shield up and ready? Or, have you set your faith aside for a while?

The 3rd thing we should understand is that...

3) Our spiritual enemy is NOT flesh and blood. Ephesians 6:12 says, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood...” The ramifications for this are HUGE; they’re vital to understand. Our battle is not against people, but rather it’s against the rulers/authorities/powers/spiritual forces of evil. Our struggle is not against PEOPLE. Therefore, it’s not against politicians or police officers, pro-choice advocates or proponents of same-sex marriage. It’s not against our land-lord, our neighbors, or our business competitors. Our struggle is not against

⁵ Ephesians 6:10 “mighty power” and 1:19 “mighty strength” are grammatically connected but also functionally connected.

⁶ The sermon, “Hope & Power,” was preached on this text on 6/5/16. The transcript and/or audio is available by emailing efree@paulbunyan.net or downloading it online from <http://www.efcbemidji.org/media>

⁷ Furthermore, even as Christ is seated next to God the Father, we are seated next to Christ. We learned about this back in Ephesians 2:6: “And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.”

⁸ And, they are active in those who are disobedient; see Ephesians 2:2.

⁹ **It is fascinating to read Acts 19:1-20** in relation to our sermon this morning. There is so much going on in these verses in terms of spiritual struggles. And, it’s going on in Ephesus! Our spiritual enemy made himself known in a manifested way. The events of Acts 19 happened about 5 years before the book of Ephesians was written. (Acts 19 happens during Paul’s 3rd missionary journey, roughly 55 a.d. Ephesians was written in roughly 60 a.d. See the NIV2011 footnotes.) Therefore, the Ephesian Christ-followers could likely have had these events in their memory as they read Ephesians 6.

Two of the most important things to note from Acts 19 are vv. 17 & 20: 17: “When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor.” 20: “In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.” So, even though the devil flexed some very real power in Ephesus, the Name of the Lord and the Word of the Lord had the clear upper hand in every way.

¹⁰ See John R. W. Stott pp. 263-266, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, IVP, IL, 1979.

¹¹ Stott, p. 264.

¹² O’Brien, p. 463.

¹³ Ephesians 6:16 reinforces this idea with its reference to ALL the flaming ARROWS; “arrows” is also in the plural.

¹⁴ **The devil is liar.** In John 8:44 Jesus says, “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

¹⁵ Stott, p. 265.

illegal immigrants or Islamic terrorists. We can certainly be against particular positions and teachings in this world, but we should never be against the PEOPLE themselves.

And here's why: Ephesians 2:1-3 taught us, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, WE were by nature deserving of wrath." Our church is a Grace Community. This means we were once lost in sin but we are now saved by grace. We used to follow the ways of this world but now, we follow Christ.

Therefore Christians, of all people, should be dispensers of grace toward the lost. Our empathy for the lost needs to drive our compassion and understanding for those who are still living in disobedience. The people who we might be prone to dislike or fear or even hate, are those who are most held captive by the powers of this dark world. And these are the very same people whom we are called to love and rescue. There's a beautiful passage in Mt. 9:35-38, "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Our mission in this world is a spiritual struggle against a spiritual enemy. But it is NOT against humans. They are the ones who are like wandering sheep, many of them lost and not-yet believers, who are helpless apart from Christ. We've been left in this world on a rescue mission!

Ephesians 6:12 is "a caution against lashing out against human opponents as though they were the real enemy..."¹⁶ Have I mentioned that the devil uses evil schemes? This is one of them: to get Christians fighting against the very people they are called to love and rescue. There is a sign on each of our exit doors: "You are now entering your mission field." Let's be a church that takes this to heart.

So how do we take our stand against such a powerful, cunning enemy? Ephesians 6:13-17 tells us, "Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."¹⁷ Our spiritual struggle is won with spiritual armor.

The nature of the armor as described by Paul is on-the-ground, hand-to-hand, up-close combat.¹⁸ The reality of our spiritual struggle is that we don't have the luxury of pushing a button from a control tower a mile away. Our fight is up close and right down in the trenches; we are foot soldiers of Christ.¹⁹ And, we shouldn't expect any cease-fires, truces, or diplomatic solutions to step in and mediate this spiritual conflict.²⁰ Our enemy will not negotiate; he has resolved to kill, steal, and destroy the Church of God, whatever it takes. John Stott makes this observation: "...if we underestimate our spiritual enemy, we shall see no need for God's armour, we shall go out to the battle unarmed, with no weapons but our own puny strength, and we shall be quickly and ignominiously defeated."²¹ There are two things we should understand about our Spiritual Armor.

First of all...

1) We have to put it on! Otherwise, it doesn't do us much good. It's like having a nice winter jacket and leaving it at home. But, it's not really helping you if it's 30 degrees below zero! v. 13 says to put on the Armor of God SO THAT you'll be able to stand your ground. Our Spiritual Armor is not something we automatically have



¹⁶ NIV2011 Study Bible, Zondervan, note on Ephesians 6:12, p. 1994.

¹⁷ If our spiritual struggle is in the here and now, then why does v. 13 talk about "when the day of evil comes"? This seems a little confusing. Looking back to Ephesians 5:16, we know that the current days are already evil. But 6:13 seems to indicate that there is some particular day approaching. Perhaps what Paul is getting at is that the devil's attacks can ebb and flow, so we should keep our guard up.

It causes me to think of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness for 40 days/nights. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, used the spiritual armor of God's Word to resist the devil's attacks. And yet, Luke 4:13 ends that account with an interesting comment: "When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time." In times when Christ-followers are feeling a certain amount of reprieve from the ongoing battle against evil, it is vital that we "not be lulled into a false sense of security." (O'Brien pp. 471-472) The devil may shoot another one of his flaming arrows when we least expect it. 1 Corinthians 10:12 warns us, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"

¹⁸ Stott, p. 262.

¹⁹ In fact, although our enemy fires flaming arrows from a distance, we read nothing about having a bow in our arsenal.

²⁰ Stott, p. 262.

²¹ Stott, p. 263.

on; we can get caught in the middle of a spiritual struggle wearing nothing but our spiritual birthday suit. That's embarrassing but also dangerous!

The 2nd thing to understand is that...

2) We need to put on the FULL Armor of God. This begs the question, what's missing from your armor? Take a look at this picture of a Roman Soldier wearing his armor. He's not partially armed; he's fully armed, to the teeth! He's ready for the struggle of battle. There are 6 key items listed in vv. 14-17: The Helmet of Salvation protects his thoughts and keeps him mindful of who he is in Christ. The Breastplate of Righteousness covers all of his vital organs. And, it's not his own righteousness but rather the righteousness of Christ that's been imputed to him and it's the righteous living that is empowered by the Holy Spirit living inside. The Belt of Truth is buckled around his waist; not a relative truth but God's one and only absolute truth.



The Shield of Faith is in his hand, ready to block the enemy's arrows. These shields often had leather on them that could be soaked in water to help put out the flaming arrows. The Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, is living and active, a sharp-double-edged sword. His feet are fitted with the readiness to preach the gospel of peace. He is on mission with God's calling in his life. Scripture calls us to total dependence upon God and His strength. Not partial dependence; not part of the armor, all of it! As Christ-followers we have everything that we need to stand firm in our spiritual struggle against evil!

This passage uses the word "stand" 4 times: v. 11 says to "take your stand" v. 13 says "stand your ground" and after you've done everything "stand" v. 14 says "stand firm then!" This is an imperative command and it drives home the key point of this entire passage. The overall context and assumption of these verses is that we can prevail against evil. There's an attitude of confidence and hope, that even though this enemy is evil and powerful and cunning, he can be overcome. God has provided every weapon needed to win this struggle.²² **So, stand firm.**

Depending upon the Lord's strength and putting on His armor will lead us to victory in our daily spiritual struggles. **So, stand firm.** There is no reason to fear or doubt or retreat from our enemy. **Stand firm!**

Sin and evil are making a mess in our world but this has not caught God by surprise. His plan is for the church, this beautiful Grace Community, to be a beacon of God's light and truth. Therefore, Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji, **stand firm!**

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on February 5, 2017 by Pastor Jerry Johnson.

²² See O'Brien's comments on pp. 464-465, 470.