

Ephesians 6:10-20

Henceforth, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of **his** power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench 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.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

The Wiles of the Devil

In this worship series we have focused on love; we've discussed *building each other up* in love, *living* in love, and *giving thanks* in love. Today we discuss *moving* in love. In those first three weeks our focus was a lot on inner piety, on encouraging others, speaking kindly to others, and being grateful to God and to others. **I challenged you speak kindly to one another and of one another, to name your sin and pray for forgiveness daily, and to live a life of gratitude recognizing the goodness of God and others and giving thanks regularly.** But I want you to understand that those spiritual exercises are not ends unto themselves; there is a greater reason that you do these things. Today I want to tie this "In Love" worship series together by recognizing that being nice to one another, asking and praying for forgiveness, and living life with gratitude are all ways to prepare you for the *real* battle that we face in the world. Today's scripture describes the Christian life as a life of warfare. These last three weeks have been like boot camp; now it's time to be deployed, because while there are certainly battles that occur within the Church – there's gossip and badmouthing and shaming and boasting, not to mention addiction and denial and apathy, and fixating on the specks in other people's eyes while being blinded to the log in your own eye – we cannot allow those internal struggles to so consume our energies to the point that we're unable to engage in the warfare that goes on *outside* the church. We don't want to be stuck in boot camp for our entire lives. It's a sad truth that many churches wither and die because the leaders never graduate boot camp; they don't grow spiritually, consequently they *don't* speak kindly of one another, they *don't* recognize or confess or grapple with their sins, and they don't feel grateful either toward God or their fellow human being. One could argue that such places are not really churches anyway because the Spirit of God is pretty much absent in the membership, and their only hope of survival as a church would be a serious spiritual revival or an influx of new spiritually-mature members. But if the members of the church speak and act lovingly toward one another, and if they humbly confess their own sins and shortcomings regularly and take steps to end their sinning, and if they express gratitude to God

and to one another, they can graduate boot camp and move on to the *real* battlefield, which is the world at large.

Now regarding the world at large, I'm just curious: how many *Smiths* do you know? *Smith* is the most common surname in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. The smithy was the person who manufactured the weapons made of metal for war, and though the smithy may have also devised pots and pans most of his work was in making implements of war; swords, shields, armor, javelins, helmets and whatnot. Do you wonder why the name *smith* is so common? Because the human race has been at war on one scale or another from the beginning of time, so there has been a great need for smithies throughout history. We've been at war forever. The first war was against God, which took the form of biting an apple, and we soon expanded that war by declaring war on one another, beginning when Cain killed Abel and continuing down to this very day. Not a generation of Americans have lived without some war going on in our midst, and even in times of "peace" we still have violence in our neighborhoods, even in our families, and yes, even in our hearts; Jesus says that even if we hold bitterness in our hearts toward someone stands in danger of judgment, and those who fail to tend to "the least of these" he consigns to the outer darkness, but we justify our hatred by lying and believing in lies about those we want to hate, and we search for safe places to live that insulate us from the struggles for food and water and medicine that go on all around us. We deal with "the wiles of the devil" everywhere and all the time, and the more we fall victim to the wiles of the devil, the longer the world wallows in darkness and despair. So it doesn't really matter how many people are seated in the pews or how much comes in through the offering, because fixating on numbers is just one of the "wiles of the devil" to distract us from the only true measure of our success which is how many lives are being positively changed by the Spirit of God. We could have a packed church and money overflowing in the offering plates, but if no lives are changed, if no souls are saved, we have accomplished nothing. Whatever size congregation we happen to be we need to be a **quality** congregation of the finest soldiers in order to do battle in this world.

That's what Paul is urging us to do in today's text; to prepare ourselves for genuine warfare in this world. And the world a very dangerous place, and we should be afraid. We can't pretend that there is no danger, and we can't run from that danger. I remember serving in the Army in 1990, the year that Iraq invaded Kuwait causing an international response that became known as the Gulf War. I remember the tension that my comrades and I felt as we went day to day wondering if our Division was going to be deployed. I was in the infantry, so if we *were* deployed there was a good chance that I would see some action. There was a lot of bravado talking about how overwhelmingly superior our forces were, and there was little doubt that the coalition forces would quickly defeat the Iraqi forces, but that didn't dispel our legitimate fear. There were lots of good soldiers who would have left the Army if they could, and there was an increase in the number of desertions, because the danger that was once only hypothetical had now become real. We in the church need to remind ourselves of that we are soldiers for Christ – thus all the imagery that we have in our scripture passage today.

And we as Christians face a far more formidable force than the Iraqi military. As Paul writes, we're dealing with something cosmic, against the spiritual forces of evil, and those forces show up anywhere and everywhere, and they are much more clever than any of us. Do not be so naïve to think that you, on your own will power, can fight evil, because evil is more clever than us.

Evil creeps up in all places and in all times, and even in the most respectable and virtuous individuals. It corrupts nations, it destroys churches, and it causes a whole lot of suffering and death. We can all think of people who seemed so nice who we later find out are guilty of horrible things. And when something like that happens we should all say to ourselves, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

And that is absolutely true statement: “There but for the grace of God go I.” It is strictly the grace of God that keeps us from straying down the path that leads to sin. It is strictly the grace of God that empowers us to recognize and resist evil in all its insidious forms. The first verse we read says, “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of **his** power.” Christ has defeated Satan; we *cannot* defeat Satan. When we reach the end of history, the end of time whenever that is, God will be in charge. Peace, love, and justice will prevail everywhere eternally, but we’re not there yet, and we are Christ’s soldiers and what we do absolutely matters, because if we are poorly trained soldiers the war will drag on longer. If we are complicit in evil, God’s kingdom will not advance. I want you to embrace that vision of history, because *that vision* informs everything else you do – how you raise your children, how you do your job, how you deal with everything in life. Everything you do can be seen in terms of a battle that is either won or lost for Jesus Christ.

And the only way that we can win it is to claim *God’s* power, to “take up the whole armor of God,” as Paul phrases it. Fasten the belt of truth around your waist; put on the breastplate of righteousness. Put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. Take the shield of faith so you can quench the flaming arrows of the devil. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Ah! That last one: the sword of the Spirit. Too many Christians seem to think they are in a defensive battle, that it’s all about holding your own ground. But what did General George Patton say about holding our ground? He said that we’re not interested in holding anything except the enemy. Paul goes through the whole list of armor that is *defensive* – breastplate, helmet, shield, etc. But he ends with a sword, the weapon of *offense* which, he says, is the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.

And Paul is not talking about the Bible here, because the Bible had not yet been compiled when Paul wrote this. Paul is talking about the word as “the mystery of the Gospel.” It’s proclaiming Christ as Lord; the one who was arrested and mocked and humiliated and tortured and killed by the forces of darkness and evil – the powers of this world- that was none other than the son of God who is currently reigns supreme in our hearts and will one day come and bring all creation under his authority. That’s what we proclaim both by word and by deed, that Christ is our Lord, that he holds authority over us, and that his kingdom of love and peace and justice (and you can’t have one without the other two) that his kingdom is coming. And so wherever we see hatred or words that provoke hatred, we speak out. Wherever we see injustice we work to fix it. Wherever we see war we work to end it. It has to start in our own lives, in our own homes, in our own church, but it needs to spread, and it needs to be vocal. Notice the last petition we read in today’s lesson: “Pray that I might declare it boldly, for I must speak!”

I pray that you would have that same compulsion that Paul had, that you would feel *compelled* to speak. Because such compulsion is the result of truly knowing the joy that overwhelms all fear and doubt, because such compulsion is the result of a peace in your heart and mind that go beyond human understanding, and because such compulsion results from the love of God that seeks to unite all humanity, all creation under God's perfect rule.