

Standing Firm

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Ephesians 6:10-20

**10** Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. **11** Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. **12** 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. **13** 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. **14** Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. **15** As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. **16** 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. **17** Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

**18** 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. **19** 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, **20** for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

## SPIRITUAL WARFARE

How can Christians confront the reality of evil?

It's odd.

We see examples of evil in the world at large.

We see examples of evil in our personal lives.

But, sometimes we are reluctant to take a stand against that evil.

Maybe we think it's not spiritual do go into combat.

That's why many of us don't particularly like our passage for today.

We might like to talk about spiritual growth.

But, we don't like to talk about spiritual warfare.

And yet the Bible uses that language all the time.  
There is a conflict between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God.  
There is a cosmic struggle for the soul of the world.

And we are a part of that struggle.

This passage was a favorite among the Reformers and the Puritans.  
As I have often said, in those days theology was a full contact sport.  
People were persecuted and killed for their faith, and sometimes it was done by  
people who claimed to be Christians.

No wonder they were anxious to put on the full armor of God.  
They needed it.

Take Martin Luther for example.  
Luther in his fight to reform the church knew that his stand might cost him his life,  
and that those who claimed to be on the side of Christ were in fact not on His side.

In Luther's hymn, A Mighty Fortress is Our God we read,  
"For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe; His craft and power are great,  
and armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal ... Did we in our own strength  
confide, our striving would be losing ..."

Luther knew that he was in a battle.  
He knew the power of hate and lies.  
And Luther knew that he was not strong enough to confront that power by himself.

But Martin Luther by the power of God's Spirit was able to stand up to evil for the  
sake of the gospel. The churches of the Reformation exist today because faithful  
people recognized evil and confronted that evil with the Word of God, that "one lit-  
tle word" (as Luther put it) that can help us overcome

The Ephesians also faced conflict at every turn.  
Spiritual warfare was not a theoretical proposition for them either.  
It was a reality.

In a world where the Emperor was worshipped as a God and peace was defined by  
what was good for the Empire, Christians were called to proclaim, "Jesus is Lord."

That got them into trouble.

And if we say that Jesus is Lord and mean it, that will get us into trouble too. The goals of the Kingdom of God are often at odds with the goals of the kingdoms in which we live.

In order to be faithful we have to take a stand.  
We have to struggle to transform the world into what God is calling it to be.

## THE REALITY OF EVIL

Of course there's a problem with that.  
Evil is strong, and we are weak.  
We face opposition at every turn, and we are not up to the task of confronting it.

Often we just throw up our hands and ask to no one in particular,  
"What's this world coming to?"  
And then we back off and live a life of quiet resignation.

Paul doesn't want us to back off.  
Paul wants us to "be strong in the Lord."  
Paul wants us to prepare ourselves for the spiritual battle that is coming.

In order to prepare for this battle we have to first believe that there is a problem.

The Apostle tells us that in the final analysis we're not fighting with "flesh and blood."

We're fighting with the "the cosmic powers of this present darkness."  
We're fighting against the "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Maybe this is why so many preachers shy away from this passage.  
It speaks about evil in a way that is too personal.  
I have no trouble preaching about evil in terms of social justice and righteousness.  
But, today's passage does more than that.

Today's passage looks at what lies behind the injustice in the world.  
Why do we have racism and systems that exploit the poor and people who think that war can be holy?  
Our lesson for today gives the answer.  
Behind those events lurks the very face of evil.

I can't explain evil.  
The reality of evil is one of life's great mysteries.

But, we know it exists.  
Evil is more than bad government and poor upbringing.  
Evil has a life of its own.

In our passage Paul explicitly mentions the devil. (6:11)  
And if that language makes you cringe, remember that many of the gospels begin with a story about the devil and the temptation of Jesus.

Paul wants us to open our eyes to the power of evil.  
We do not struggle just against flesh and blood.  
We struggle against "the cosmic powers of this present darkness."

To put it another way, when someone asks,  
"What's this world coming to?" we could honestly answer, "It's worse than you think."

This is a battle that we cannot fight on our own.

## BE STRONG IN THE LORD

Many think if only we would elect the right president or adopt the right policies things would get better. If only we could get stronger mentally and physically then we could fight the demons that plague us. Not so.

The Bible tells us that the devil prowls this world like a "roaring lion" looking for someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8) As Luther put it, "His craft and power are great."

So, the only way we can stand in this battle is to "be strong" in the Lord.  
The verb is in the passive tense which suggests that we can't be strong on our own.  
We must be strengthened by someone else.

We must be strengthened by God in Christ.  
We are strong "in the Lord."  
And that is enough.

The Bible tells us that when we are in the Lord spiritual warfare is not a fair fight.

Jesus has already “disarmed the rulers and the authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them on the cross.” In other words evil was decisively defeated on the cross of Christ. (Colossians 2:15).

Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians by stating that Jesus now sits at the right hand of God, “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion ... not only in this age but also in the age to come.” (1:20-23)

So, how can we fight evil?

We begin by remembering that the battle has already been won. Evil has already been defeated.

Another great hymn puts it well.

“This is my Father’s world.

And though the wrong seems oft so strong.

God is the ruler yet.”

We take evil seriously enough to put on the full armor of God. But, we don’t take evil too seriously.

A ROMAN GUARD?

I imagine Paul looking at a Roman soldier as he wrote this letter from prison. He was (as he put it) an “ambassador in chains” for Christ and the gospel.

And as he looked at this young, strong soldier, Paul saw an example of the power and might of the Empire. He saw the wide belt that held his large sword, his breastplate, and his helmet.

And Paul wondered,

“What would it be like to put on the armor of the Lord?

How would the uniform of those who are soldiers of the cross look different?

And how would that uniform help Christians be strong in the face of such might and evil?”

For those of you who have trouble with military metaphors, I would offer you comfort by suggesting that what Paul is doing here is very subversive.

He is taking the weapons of war and redefining them to fit the kingdom of God.

## THE BELT OF TRUTH

The first thing we must put on is the belt of truth.

Evil thrives on lies.

According to Jesus, the devil is the father of lies. (John 8:44) We learn from Genesis on that the he attacks often come in the form of clever, whispered half-truths. (Genesis 3).

So, the most important weapon to combat the lies of the enemy is the truth of God as revealed in Jesus. Evil dies in the presence of the truth. And truth does indeed set us free. (John 8:32)

In the King James translation of the Bible we sometimes read the rather quaint phrase “gird up your loins.” Do you know what that means?

In the ancient world everyone wore long, flowing robes.

But, if a soldier was preparing for battle he would gather up the excess cloth and use his belt to hold it up. This way he wouldn’t be tripped up or slowed down in the confusion of battle.

Thus “gird up your loins” became a phrase that was often used to denote preparing for any momentous event. Paul was saying that we prepare for the big tests in life by learning to tell the truth to ourselves and to others. Absolute honesty is the foundation for anyone who would be a disciple of Christ.

Nothing can bring down a Christian faster than living a lie. We must learn to live the truth, and at the heart of the Christian faith is a truth that is hard to hear.

We are sinners.

We fall short of our own standards, and we certainly fall short of God’s standards. We’re not the people we want to be or should be.

That’s why we begin every worship service with a confession of sin. We are putting on the belt of truth. We are preparing ourselves for spiritual battle by being honest to God and ourselves. This keeps us from being tripped up when the going gets rough.

Jesus is the gold standard when it comes to truth.  
In the reflection of Jesus we see how we have failed and who we are called to be.

## BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The next item we need to put on is the breastplate of righteousness

To guard his vital organs, the Roman soldier wore a breastplate of solid metal.  
To guard our hearts, we must cover ourselves with the breastplate of righteousness.

What is this breastplate of righteousness?  
What does it mean to put it on?

Jesus said that we should love the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves. Perhaps this is what it means to put on the breastplate of righteousness.

We do what faith requires. In some small way we not only talk about our love for Jesus; we also show our love for Jesus through our actions.

It is not enough just to tell the truth.  
We must live the truth.

We must (as the prophet put it) “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.” That’s the breastplate of righteousness, and it guards our heart.

## THE SHOES OF PEACE

And now that we’ve got that on, let’s think about footwear.

Roman soldiers wore special thick, hobnailed sandals that both protected and anchored their feet in battle. With a good solid foundation, they were ready to fight. In the same way, we must be grounded if we are to battle successfully.

And ironically what prepares us for the fight is “the gospel of peace.” Paul tells us to wear shoes that will take us on the path of peace.

This is where God’s truth as revealed in Jesus gets really hard. When Jesus tells us to love our enemies and do good to those that persecute us, we may nod our heads

in agreement. But, then we run into an actual enemy who wants to do us harm, and we are not so sure that we want to follow this crazy man named Jesus.

Jesus would not allow his disciples to take up the sword against those who persecuted him. Instead, he chose to take up a cross on their behalf.

And strangely enough it was the cross that finally defeated the evil one. Following Jesus requires great courage. It requires us to be devoted to peace in a world that is anxious to go to war.

### THE SHIELD OF FAITH

Next Paul talks about the shield of faith.

The Roman shield Paul is alluding to was very large, made of thick wood and covered with leather. It could be soaked in water before battle so that it would extinguish flaming arrows shot by the enemy.

In many cases when the Romans locked their shields together and went into battle it proved to be a barrier that could not be penetrated.

In the same way, the shield of faith protects us from the enemy. Faith is simply trusting in the promises of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is believing that God is not out to get us. God is out to save us.

It is the shield of God's promises quench the arrows of doubt and despair.

### THE HELMET OF SALVATION

And that brings us to the greatest promise of all, the crowning touch so to speak. It is the promise of salvation.

Paul talks about putting on the helmet of salvation.  
What is salvation? From what are we saved?

We are saved from our sins.  
Salvation is summed up by the declaration of pardon,  
"In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven."

More things are wrought by guilt than this world dreams of. It is guilt that keeps people from telling the truth.

It is guilt that keeps people from doing justice.

It is guilt that keeps people from making peace.

It is guilt that keeps people from trusting the goodness of God.

Remember, you don't have to justify yourself.

God in Christ has already done that.

In Jesus Christ you are forgiven.

Therefore, we are free to live a new way. We are new creations in Christ Jesus.

Guilt no longer controls our life.

Luther said that when he felt tempted by Satan he would reply,

“Remember Martin that you are baptized.”

By that he meant that in baptism his sins had been washed away. By the grace of God he was saved and nothing and no one could take that away.

Don't let guilt prevent you from being a soldier of the cross.

Each and every morning put on the helmet of salvation. Remember the wonderful truth.

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

You are a sinner saved by grace.

That's the helmet of salvation.

## THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

Paul now talks about the one offensive weapon in the whole armor of God, the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God.

Paul is talking about more than just reading the Bible. Paul is talking about doing theology. Paul is talking about applying the Bible to the modern world through the power of the Spirit.

The only way we can take the battle to the enemy is with the Word of God in hand. That's how Jesus defeated an attacking devil in the wilderness. Three times, he warded off the devil's thrust with the Word of God. "It is written," he said.

In the same way, we are charged to look at life through the lens of Scripture.

Christians have a unique way of looking at the world. We see the world through the life of Jesus as He is revealed in Scripture. And we are empowered by the Spirit of Christ to bring that unique perspective into the world.

We not only judge the world in which we live by God's Word and Spirit; we also are judged by the sword of God's Word and Spirit. Like a surgeon's scalpel the word of God cuts out of our lives those things that would harm us. It may be painful, but in the long run it is good for us.

#### PRAY IN THE SPIRIT

Finally, Paul asks the Ephesians to "pray in the Spirit at all times." A life bathed in prayer enables them to be "alert" to what is really important in life and to persevere in difficult circumstances.

Throughout our lesson for today Paul emphasized the importance of standing firm in the face of evil.

We do not strut or pound our chest.  
We simply stand on the promises of God.  
We persevere in good times and bad.

The disciples of Jesus believe that the victory has already been won on the cross. Jesus is indeed King of kings and Lord of lords.  
And because we believe each day we put on the uniform of faith.

We stand and will not be moved.  
We are given courage for the living of these days.

Amen.