

Ephesians 6:10-20
(Psalm 3:1-8; Matthew 4:1-11)
“Be Strong in the Lord”

Introduction

Last Sunday we studied Paul’s three illustrations of living wisely in three key relationships of life: marriage, family and work. In each case, his call was counter-cultural, counter-intuitive, and resulted over the centuries in subverting the ancient order where women, children and slaves were considered property to be valued or cast aside as one chose. I’ve called Paul’s advice counter-intuitive because, in order to bring freedom and equality to those in bondage to a cruel and unjust social system, he does not call on them to rebel. Rather he calls on them to submit: to be the best wife, child or slave, not for the sake of one’s husband, father or master, but for the honor and glory of Christ.

But how could that possibly lead to anything other than continuation of an unjust status quo? The answer is found in Paul’s brilliant, gospel-driven call to those in power: you, he says, also must submit to those whom life has placed under your authority, “out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). So husbands “love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” In other words, as she lays down her life for you, lay your life down for her as Christ did for you. Fathers, don’t provoke your children, but raise them up to know the Lord with the same fatherly love with which the Lord has loved you. Masters, stop treating your slaves harshly, and remember that your Master in heaven has set you free to be his dearly loved sons. That is how you should treat your slaves, just as you wish to be treated.

In other words, in every relationship of life, the godly person, whether in a position of weakness or of power, is to say, “My life is not my own. How can I love this person I am dealing with every day with the same kind of self-sacrificial love with which the Lord has loved me?” It was that slowly growing realization of the implications of the gospel in every relationship of life that finally turned the world upside down, yielding equal rights for women, laws against child labor and child abuse, and the abolition of slavery.

But now Paul wants to make sure that we do not misapply his instructions. While we are to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21), there is one area of life where we are never to submit, and one realm of created beings to which we are never to submit. In spiritual warfare, we are called to stand our ground and never give way: no sympathy for devil! Paul makes clear whom we are always to stand with, and whom we are always to stand against. He contrasts the Lord’s strength and the devil’s schemes. We must be in union with Christ to experience the Lord’s strength, and must understand the nature of temptation and the particular areas of our own temptability in order to stand against the devil’s schemes.

Body

1. Who is for us?

The Lord Jesus, who shares our flesh and blood, who has already fought and won the same battle we face, and has already defeated the same foe whom we must face every day. But how do we experience the reality of our union with Christ in the press and crush of life?

The body of Christ, the church, our brothers and sisters who share in the same battle and who stand together to encourage, support and strengthen one another. It is together that we ordinarily experience the reality of Christ through our pursuit of a sacramental life together, studying God's Word, praying together, worshiping, gathering around the Lord's table, going out on mission in his name. A Christian fighting the battle alone without a deep, heart-felt connection with other Christians, is like a soldier lost and alone behind enemy lines, cut off from his platoon, with no one to cover his back.

Everything that Paul tells us here and that the rest of the New Testament teaches about the Christian life, presupposes that we are part of a local congregation of believers who are helping one another fight the good fight, and stand in the day of temptation.

2. Who is against us?

Not flesh and blood, but *the devil*, who tempts, accuses and seeks to destroy the people of God, but is already a defeated foe. I love the point Eugene Peterson makes in his fine little commentary on the book of Revelation entitled, *Reversed Thunder*. He reminds us that we tend to think of the final battle between God and the devil as being a great and epic, terrifying culmination of the battle between good and evil. However, when the final battle comes, it is over in a moment. John writes that when Satan has gathered his troops for battle,

They marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:9-10).

Peterson writes, "If you went out for popcorn, you missed the whole thing!"

Nonetheless, there is a *kingdom of darkness* whose doom is sure, but that still causes trouble with its threats and seductions, what Paul calls, "the rulers," "the authorities," "the cosmic powers over this present darkness," "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Paul has already written

that these cosmic powers are watching the church, watching us, “so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (3:10). Such language is strange to our ears in a world that focuses on physical, measurable, causes and effects. However, one thing that modern physics confirms is that there is far more to reality than meets the eye.

The key is this: unless we are aware that we are in a battle, we will likely end up casualties. Unless we know that our foe has already been defeated, we will be tempted to give way to fear. The way forward is by realizing that Jesus has already won the decisive battle and has invited us to join him in the mopping up operations.

3. How are we to stand our ground in spiritual warfare?

We stand our ground by taking up the whole armor of God, the unique privilege of all those who are Christ. Remember that Paul writes as a prisoner, and was surrounded by Roman soldiers who dressed in this way. So it was natural for him to picture our preparing for spiritual warfare in these terms and to describe in military terms our life in Christ, a life that he elsewhere describes merely as putting on one’s clothes in the morning (Colossians 3:10f).

The great Puritan pastors tended to spend months, sometimes years, expounding these ten verses, the best known being William Gurnall’s, *The Christian in Complete Armour*, three large volumes including his sermons and lectures on these verses, preached and taught over many years. I suspect the apostle Paul would have been amazed, perhaps amused, at how much one could draw from these few verses. Remembering that Paul’s letters were intended to be read to the churches, the entire letter at one sitting, I hope simply to underscore briefly what, I think, was most on Paul’s heart and mind as he gave these instructions.

The belt of truth: In a world that often values freedom more than truth, and that sometimes doubts whether there is any truth to be known, Paul reminds us that without truth girding everything together, freedom leads quickly to bondage. Note, for an exposition of this thought, John Paul II’s, *The Splendor of Truth*.

The breastplate of righteousness: This is the righteousness through faith given us by virtue of being in Christ, as a new creation. Our sin has been dealt with on the cross, and his righteousness made ours, so that the enemy has no accusation that can hold up. The penalty is paid; our hearts are protected.

The shoes of the gospel of peace: It should be the good news of Christ that gets us up and going, that takes us places we would otherwise be unwilling to go, except for the love of Christ and love of others.

The shield of faith: It is the active expression of our trust in Christ alone and in all he has provided that protects us from Satan's assaults.

The helmet of salvation: When crushing blows come that would otherwise knock you to the ground, it is your salvation that keeps you standing and that protects your mind from the enemy's lies.

The sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God: Here is an active weapon with which you can strike back. The model is the account we read this morning of Jesus using Scripture to defeat Satan during the wilderness temptation, each time answering the tempter by saying, "It is written," and quoting the truth of God in the face of Satan's lies (Matthew 4:1f).

And we stand our ground by praying, the unique privilege of those in whom is the Spirit of Christ.

At all times: The Lord has given us access to him every moment of every day. In a deep sense, we should never be more than a moment removed from talking with him. The more we acknowledge his presence without ceasing, the more ready we are for battle and the more assured of Christ's victory.

In the Spirit: It is the Spirit of Christ in us that enables us to know and understand the things of God. When we pray in the Spirit we have a quiet confidence that we are not merely talking into the wind with an imaginary friend, but with our loving heavenly Father who hears his children's cries.

With all kinds of prayer: There are many ways to pray, none more correct than another. Use them all, as you repent, give thanks, make requests, worship.

With perseverance: Don't quit! Keep praying! Don't ever give up!

For the church ("for all the saints"): Learn to pray for more than you know and experience, the worldwide church, the family you have not yet met.

For individuals who request your prayers: But also pray for those who, like Paul, request your prayers.

Conclusion

Paul simply describes in military terms what Christ has given to those who are in him through faith. You are not alone. In the day of temptation, remember that all things have been given you by the One who has already defeated Satan and destroyed the power of death. So, “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (6:10-11).

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