

Have you ever done something and then thought to yourself, “I can’t believe I did that! That’s not me! Why did I do such a thing?” You hope no one saw it. You hope no one ever finds out. Have you watched news about the random shootings of unsuspecting, helpless people and said, “What’s wrong with people? Why would someone do that? Why can’t Congress approve background checks? Why do we not aggressively treat mental illness?” Your shame and disappointment about yourself and your anger and helplessness about the violence bring you face to face with the power of evil to damage and destroy.

I am going to talk about spiritual warfare today and next Sunday, and I want you to know up front that I think the world is a beautiful place. Evil can deface that beauty for a while, but it can never erase it. The goodness of God goes deeper than all the schemes of hell. God is all-powerful. The devil is only a pretender to such power. The devil is a bully, and his doom is sure. So, I am going to talk about spiritual warfare, but I am no pessimist. **Where sin abounds, grace abounds much more.** (Romans 5:20) The darkest passages in Ephesians are filled with hope. Let’s get started.

Clear Purpose and Clear Challenge

Ephesians 4 opened with a clear purpose and a clear challenge to embrace that purpose. **As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.** The clear purpose, said the apostle, is **the calling you have received** from God. That calling takes us back to Ephesians 2:22, which says that in Christ the whole Church is **being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.** The Church is God’s dwelling place on earth. That’s us. We are the flesh in which God lives in this world. We are the “anchor that God has sunk into the soil of creation.” (Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 256) That’s the Church’s calling. That is our calling. That is our clear purpose.

The challenge to embrace that purpose is equally clear: **live a life worthy of the calling you have received.** A life worthy of our calling revolves around three governing ideas in Ephesians 4-6: 1) the unity of the Church, 2) the new attitude and lifestyle of the Church, and 3) the spiritual warfare of the Church.

We have talked about the unity of the Church and the new attitude and lifestyle of the Church for almost three months. Hard experience teaches us that achieving that unity and living that new attitude and lifestyle consistently bring us face to face with evil. It lands us in a battle. We call that battle the spiritual warfare of the Church. Ephesians 6:10-17 is all about that spiritual warfare.

The Heavenly Realms

Ephesians 6:12 locates the source of our spiritual warfare **in the heavenly realms. 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.** What are **the heavenly realms**? It’s easy to think Paul meant heaven, but he didn’t.

After all, verse 12 says that the heavenly realms are home to **the rulers, . . . the authorities, . . . the powers of this dark world and . . . the spiritual forces of evil.** That isn’t heaven. It’s more like the “Cosmic Hood.” It’s a dangerous place. It’s where evil

forces operate that are antagonistic to the Church and to all human flourishing. They pose real danger to us right here, right now. They fragment. They betray. They kill.

They are like a force of nature – like a tornado, hurricane, earthquake, wildfire, gravity, or genetic mutation. But a force of nature, even when it destroys, does not destroy on purpose. **The powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil** destroy on purpose. Jesus said about the devil in John 8:44: **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.**

It is the nature of evil to corrupt all things human. We see it in addiction, violence, poverty, and abortion. But evil also corrupts institutions: government, media, Church, education, and marriage. I hear people talk about overcoming cruelty, violence, and poverty as if it were just a matter of having enough money, brains, and manpower. That's naïve. They don't know the nature of evil. It will crush your idealism like a bug.

Strong in the Lord

Now the good news! **The rulers, . . . the authorities, . . . the powers of this dark world and . . . the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms** are not all-powerful. They can be resisted. They can't be eradicated – not yet and not by us, but they can be resisted. Listen to the apostle's stirring call to prepare for spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6:10-11: **Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.**

These are not the words of a pessimist or a defeatist. Paul was not likely to underestimate the power of evil, but he also knew the limitations of that power. We know why he was confident in his call to the Church to **take your stand against the devil's schemes.**

Look back at Ephesians 1:20-22: God **raised him** (Jesus) **from the dead**. Christ died on Good Friday by crucifixion. A competent medical examiner would have declared Him dead. He was buried in a borrowed tomb, and three days later, He came back to life with an indestructible body. He appeared to individuals, small groups, and on one occasion to about 500 people. Jesus has overcome the last enemy, which is death. He will destroy the devil and his works.

But there is more. God **raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand**. In scripture "the right hand of God" is a figure of speech that means God's power to work His will in human affairs. To say that Jesus is seated at God's right hand means that God has entrusted Him to exert that power on behalf of mankind to save us from our evil. Christ has already set in motion processes by which the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of God.

And look at the end of verse 21: God **raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.**

The powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil are no match for the Savior of the world. Verse 22 drives the home the supremacy of Christ over evil and the worst that it can do: **And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.**

The decisive battle against evil has already been fought and won in this world. Christ fought it and won it on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. That's why Paul was confident in his call to the Church to **take your stand against the devil's schemes**. When he said in verse 10: **be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power**, he meant: Don't let evil intimidate you. Don't let it make your love grow cold and your heart grow hard. There may be times when, like Jesus on the cross, we feel like God has forsaken us. If we feel that, then at the very least, like Christ, we can still say, "My God, my God!" and commend our spirits into His hands. Let us never, never, never give up. Let's be strong like Him.

How do we do that? Verse 13: **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.** So, what's our armor? What do we fight with in the spiritual warfare of the Church? Let's do an inventory of the armor we have!

First is truth. Christians are to be truth tellers. Next comes righteousness. Christians seek to do what is right in God's eyes. Third is the gospel of peace. We who have found peace with God (Romans 5:1) are to be peacemakers with our fellow man. Fourth is faith. We believe that God is and He rewards those who diligently seek Him through Jesus Christ. (Hebrews 11:1) Heaven, not earth, has captured our hearts. Next comes salvation. There was a time when we were dead spiritually, separate from Christ, excluded from the people of God, foreigners to God's promises, without hope, and without God in the world. But now in union with Christ we have been saved from that fate. We have been joined to the people of God. We are alive with Christ. We came to life when we believed in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead, said publicly, "Jesus is Lord," and were baptized into His name. Sixth is the word of God, which Paul called **the sword of the Spirit**. Billy Graham once said, "Sin will keep you from God's word, or God's word will keep you from sin." Last is prayer, which we will consider in great depth next Sunday.

Take Aways

Now, I go back to where I started. Have you ever done something and then thought to yourself, "I can't believe I did that! That's not me! Why did I do such a thing?" You hope no one saw it. You hope no one ever finds out. Have you watched news about the random shootings of unsuspecting, helpless people and said, "What's wrong with people? Why would someone do that? Why can't Congress approve background checks? Why do we not aggressively treat mental illness?" Your shame and disappointment about yourself and your anger and helplessness about the violence bring you face to face with the power of evil to damage and destroy.

The power of evil to damage and destroy comes in two forms. One form is like a house fire. It is public and fearful. We remember this form only too well as we approach the first anniversary of the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School. I believe Paul had in mind this public and fearful form of evil in verse 13 when he talked about the coming of **the day of evil**. When such a day comes over your life, you will need every piece of armor we just talked about.

A second form of the power of evil to damage and destroy is like termites in your house. They work silently, invisibly for the longest time. A homeowner might suspect a termite infestation and do nothing about it. "It can't be that bad," he says, "nothing bad

has happened.” That kind of homeowner will not act until he sees damage on a scale with a house fire.

Our temptation is to treat evil the way that second homeowner treats termites. Most of us want to think of ourselves as a society “characterized by innocence, idealism, beauty, and hope.” (Mark Galli, “The Galli Report”) It’s a lovely thought, but it can blind us to the critical mass of termites that is eating away at the moral fabric of our nation. Widespread divorce, cohabitation, and same-sex marriage suggest that something has given way. The damage evil is doing to us is far greater than we want to believe. I say again: The goodness of God goes deeper than all the schemes of hell; but the schemes of hell are real, and they do real damage to people and nations. **Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.**

I’d like to leave you with an image that is quite different from the image of armor, but in imagination as in dreams they go together. For ages and ages spiritual leaders have taught us that the Church is like Noah’s ark, a place of refuge from the growing catastrophe outside. Frederick Buechner has written a book called *Whistling in the Dark*. Here’s a sampling of his take on the Church as Noah’s ark.

“It’s not all enjoyable. There’s backbiting just like everywhere else. There’s a pecking order. There’s jostling at the trough. There’s growling and grouching, bitching and whining. There are dogs in the manger and old goats and black widows. It’s a regular menagerie in there, and sometimes it smells to high Heaven like one.

“But even at its worst, there’s at least one thing that makes it bearable within, and that is the storm without – the wild winds and terrible waves and in all the watery waste no help in sight.

“And at its best there is, if never clear sailing, shelter from the blast, a sense of somehow heading in the right direction in spite of everything, a ship to keep afloat, and, like a beacon in the dark, the hope of finding safe harbor at last.”

(<http://www.internetmonk.com/archive/the-church-as-noahs-ark>, accessed November 23, 2013)

I’d rather be here in the ark with you than **walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers**; and, changing the figure of speech back again, I choose to stand shoulder to shoulder with you, armed with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, scripture, and prayer, against **the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this dark world, and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms**. He who is in us is greater than him who is in the world. (1 John 4:4)