

Sermon for August 26, 2018
“The Body of Christ: Onward Christian Soldiers”

Ephesians 6:10-20

For the past 7 weeks we have been making our way through the book of Ephesians. We have seen how the theme of the church as the Body of Christ has woven its way through this book. It started off with a thanksgiving to God emphasizing the way that the church the Body of Christ has been blessed. It went on to tell us how in Christ God has broken down the walls that divide us to bring us together in the One Body. In the Body of Christ, we have been given the tremendous power of love to inspire and sustain us. We have bragged on the church in which we are brought together in one body to glorify and serve God and uphold one another. We have learned that as the Body of Christ we should imitate God in grace and love. Last week we learned how we should submit ourselves to one another in love out of reverence for Christ. Finally, today the book of Ephesians gives the church its marching orders: spiritually speaking.

Paul says, "Put on the whole armor of God." Some Christians are frankly put off by this militaristic image. You must admit the church has had some bad experiences with this kind of thing. This kind of imagery has been used in centuries past to justify things like crusades and pogroms and inquisitions.

Let me assure you, the Bible here is not telling us to make war, to kill and maim other human beings, in the name of Christ. Paul here is writing a letter of encouragement to a group of Christians that are under siege. To Christians who are trying to heal broken spirits and bodies. To Christians who are trying to bring peace to war torn souls and societies. The early church was under attack from both sides. The Jewish leadership opposed to them because they dared to declare that Jesus was God's Messiah. And the Romans opposed them because their religion forbid them to worship the Roman and Greek gods.

In Ephesians Paul tried to inspire them to be strong in the face of their troubles. He is telling them that their strength in the face of such opposition comes from Christ and him alone. He is **not** saying that they should take up a literal sword against their foes. He is simply using poetic language to help them see the strength that God has given them.

Who was the prime enemy of the Ephesians? Was it the Jewish leadership? Of course, the first Christians were Jews, like the 12 and Paul, who had come to believe that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, but some of their fellow Jews were offended by this belief. Sometimes they stirred up opposition to Paul and the churches he started. It was even a group like this who stoned Stephen the first Christian martyr.

Was their enemy the Romans? The Romans had little respect for Christians. They barely tolerated the Jews. They hated Jews and Christians because they didn't believe in the Roman gods. They tolerated Judaism only because of its ancientness, but these Christians were just upstart troublemakers to them. Many early Christians were killed by the Roman Empire.

Was their enemy worldliness? Ephesus was like any other ancient city. All sorts of evil living was going on there.

But Paul identifies none of these as the Christians' enemy. He wrote, "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." Yes, some of the non-believing Jews, the Romans, and worldliness were all forces that opposed them, but their real enemy was none of these. These were merely manifestations of something darker and more sinister. Their enemy was larger than the Sanhedrin. It was larger than Caesar. It was even larger than the carnal and materialistic self-centeredness that drives people to the depths of injustice. Their enemy was the evil spiritual powers that were behind all the violence and oppression: "the cosmic powers of this present darkness." It was all that blinds, oppresses, and imprisons the human spirit and soul in this age.

To face this enemy Paul says, "Put on the full armor of God." He said, "Stand therefore having girded your loins with truth." What truth? The truth that God loved the world and sent his Son to die for it. The truth that God is the creator of this world and he has given all power into Jesus' hands. The truth that Jesus will come again bringing judgment and blessing. That Jesus will open the eyes of the blind, set the prisoners free, and liberate the oppressed. The truth that "Blessed are you when they revile you and persecute you and speak all manner of evil against you of account of the Gospel."

“Stand ... having put on the breastplate of righteousness.” In other words, know that you are saved. You have given yourself to God in Christ. You have been clothed in the righteousness of Christ and he will protect you. That breastplate will protect your heart!

“Stand ... having put on ... the shoes of the Gospel of Peace.” The shoes of the gospel of peace? Sounds like a bad country gospel song. But it makes sense. The Gospel was meant to be spread, and, in those days, the main mode of transportation was on foot. So, Paul is telling them to be foot soldiers and keep spreading the Good News of peace in Christ.

“Besides all these taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench the fiery darts of the evil one.” Don't misunderstand. Faith is not something to cower behind and ignore the evil of the world. It's a shield that protects one who is doing battle with evil. It is used to stop the fiery darts thrown at those who would dare to face the Devil in spiritual battle.

“And take the helmet of salvation.” A single blow to the head can take a life. But we have been given eternal life. The devil can't strike us down, because we will rise. Salvation is like a helmet that prevents death.

“And the sword of the Spirit which is God's Word.” It may seem trite to speak of the Bible as a sword. But it is the written record of the truth and that truth is a weapon. Only truth can dispel ignorance; only light can dispel darkness. Evil's main weapons are darkness and ignorance and only the light and truth of God's Word can defeat them. The truth of God can open the eyes of the blind and free people from the prison of their sin.

“Pray at all times.” Prayer is not a weapon, is it? A popular Christian song speaks of the Church as an army fighting on its knees. We often think of "just praying" as doing nothing and we say, "It is the least I can do." If there really is a God in heaven that hears and responds to prayers, then it is the most we can do. Praying never absolves us from doing what we are capable of doing, being the hands and feet of Christ, but through prayer we call on a power that is capable of things we could never do.

Paul wrote these things to a group of Christians in a Mediterranean town almost 2,000 years ago, but he wrote them for us too because we are under siege. Who is our enemy? Is it the rampant materialism and worldliness of our age? Is it the encroachment of civil authorities on religious freedoms? Is it the specters of crime, poverty, drug abuse, etc.? Is it the festering sore of prejudice growing in our country? Is it the dissolution of the family and the growing number of dysfunctional and abusive homes?

No, our enemy is not flesh and blood, but the powers of evil and oppression behind all these evils! We could make a long list of the evils of this world, and all those things threaten to crush the human spirit and humans' souls for whom Christ died and rose again, but they are not the enemy.

The ultimate enemy is the forces of darkness behind them. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood. Our fight is against the powers and principalities of darkness that wreak havoc and chaos in people's lives and souls.

So, equip yourselves for a war with evil. Accept the tools God gives you to do battle with ignorance and darkness. Look to God for the truth that dispels the darkness of ignorance. Look to Christ who gives eternal life that evil can never take away. Look to the Holy Spirit that gives you strength to stand when the battle is long and guidance when the enemy is hard to find. Look to the Almighty that gives you a Gospel of love and peace that can heal the wounds of the world.

Our battle may be a spiritual one, but it is none the less real. People are dying because of the oppression of evil. They are dying spiritually because they have not experienced the new life Christ offers them. They also die physically as they resort to drugs, violence, and dangerous lifestyles. They are dying, and God has given us the equipment to bring them life.

Don't just stand there! Fight! Get on your knees and pray for their lives and souls. Put your shoes on and spread the word that God is love and Jesus is life. Grab your sword of truth and cut down the ignorance and darkness. Get your shield and protect the helpless and hopeless against the evil onslaught. For heavens sakes, put on the full armor God gives you and fight! Be the Body of Christ and play your role in God's plan for redeeming the world!