

**“Engaging the Struggle between Good and Evil”**

**Ephesians 6:10-20**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

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There is a great deal of interest these days in films and books which deal with certain subject matter – *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*. Not everyone is into these films, I know. When I found out that Daniel Ray had not seen the *Indiana Jones* films or even the *Wizard of Oz*, I came to realize just how limited some people’s experience with films is, though Dana has not seen *Casablanca*... and this doesn’t even begin to assess what important literature we have all absorbed. But quite a few people, if not most, have seen the films and/or read the books I have listed.

They all construct mythic worlds which are fascinating to enter. They develop interesting characters, have fast-moving plots – well, all but *Game of Thrones* – and have wonderful visual effects in the film versions. But there is also an underlying theme running through all of these story lines – the ongoing struggle between good and evil. Other books and movies explore this theme too, but these films certainly do. Indeed, it is a key part of what stirs interest. We want to know whether the good guys and gals win in the end and we want to know if there really are mysterious forces at work in the world for good and evil.

The interesting thing about all of this, or at least one interesting thing, is that when postmodern people encounter this theme in religious texts, there is a tendency to dismiss it as hopelessly out-of-date. Today’s reading from Ephesians includes a reference to “standing against the wiles of the devil.” How many of us, even in church, cringe at this language? The only use of “wiles” I can think of is in the Disney film *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* where Grumpy says females are full of wicked wiles. When asked what they are, he replies, “I don’t know, but I’m agin’ em!” When we hear the word “devil”, we think of the nasty-looking red guy with pointed ears and a pitchfork. We don’t really believe he exists and thus we question all of this good and evil stuff.

And yet, we tune in to these books and films. Why? Because deep down we know there is more to this world than we can see with the naked eye or document with the most sophisticated scientific instrument. There is a spiritual dimension to life, there are spiritual forces at work in the world, there is an ongoing struggle between good and evil. How else can we explain the realities of the Holocaust and other attempts at genocide in places like Rwanda and Soviet Siberia, the history of slavery that still plagues this land and many others as well as the current realities of human trafficking, the devastating powers of addiction and abuse?

We can account for certain human forces for good and ill, we can explain individual actions and even the way groups of people are led to do things together that no individual would, but we cannot account for certain systemic ills that plague institutions and nations. So, we turn to the hidden realities of good and evil, perhaps not personified on the evil side, but real nonetheless, a demonic force working against a good one.

This is what the Apostle Paul or a disciple of his is talking about in the text we have read from Ephesians 6. He says there is evil in this world we must struggle with, the wiles of the devil we must stand against. “For our struggle,” he says, “is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” But the author doesn’t just say there is a struggle. He offers counsel as to how we might engage the struggle faithfully.

He begins with the basic counsel to be strong in the Lord in the strength of God’s power and stand against evil. In his book *Practice Resurrection* (p. 260) Eugene Peterson says there are two normal ways to confront this clear enemy – sink into a quicksand of paranoia, live in panic and avoid evil at all costs or join forces with the demagogues, moralists, and defenders of purity in vilifying others, mounting crusades and defining ourselves by what we are against. Basically, he is talking about a fight or flight response. But he goes on to say that the text is actually suggesting a third option – neither fighting against evil nor fleeing out of fear, but simply taking our stand as Christians, acting and believing in a way that is shaped by who we are in Christ.

This is indeed what Ephesians says. Be strong in the Lord that you may stand against evil, stand where you are, act on your beliefs no matter what is going on around you. How can we do this? In part, because we are empowered by God's Spirit. We are called to be strong "in the Lord" trusting that God is in us. We are not alone.

But we also do this with the knowledge that in the great cosmic struggle between good and evil, between God and all that opposes God's reign, God and good will ultimately prevail. In a sense, the victory already has been won through incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection. Not all things are yet subject to Christ's reign, as anyone who pays attention to life can tell, but one day they will be. This knowledge enables us to remain strong, stand against evil, be who we are.

The author goes on to name specific strategies for standing where we are, but before we consider them, it might be helpful to consider the ways in which evil works. There are a couple of challenges we face in recognizing evil. First, we are often tempted to associate anyone with whom we disagree as evil. Evil is in the other, not in us. We are on the side of good, always, of course! Deep down we know this is not exactly true. No matter how noble our motives are, there are times when we get it wrong, and getting it wrong is not the same thing as being evil.

Second, evil often works in subtle ways that are difficult to recognize. There are obvious things anyone can recognize as evil – lust, violence, bullying, abuse, slander, lying, harassment, discrimination. But there are also things that are not obvious and yet are just as destructive. Some of them become embedded in institutions and culture. For example, racism is something we all participate in, whether we realize it or not, and it is evil, against God's desire. And some of them are just subtle and devious because this is the way evil works.

The word translated as "wiles" as in "wiles of the devil" just means ways or methods, but in the sense of betraying the identity of the one acting. The wiles of evil are by nature devious and calculating. So, often temptation doesn't look like temptation on the surface. If it did, it wouldn't be very tempting.

Last week, I talked about my college roommate's grandfather who was a Nazarene pastor. Granddaddy had been a rowdy young man. He

played in a Big Band, was quite a roller skater and mostly enjoyed life, but with a bit of mischief involved. When he became a Christian, he gave up his old life, including movies which he was taught were evil. So, he never went to another movie, not even a Disney movie!

So, he was not tempted by many things others were, but he insisted that he was tempted, not to love as he ought, to accept flimsy excuses for not acting kindly toward others, for holding on to grudges, for refusing to forgive. Evil works in subtle ways. If we are to stand firmly where we are in Christ and not be overcome by evil, we have to realize this.

But all of this having been said, what are the specific strategies the text offers to help us engage faithfully the struggle between good and evil? There are seven of them, the first six of which are linked to different parts of a first-century soldier's armor. We think Paul, if he is writing these words, may have done so from a prison cell with a guard standing nearby. He refers to himself as an ambassador in chains (6:20). So, he uses a military metaphor because it communicates and makes sense in the context of battle, but also because this is the image he sees.

If we are still troubled by the metaphor, we might find comfort in the reality that what the author is arguing for is not military action. Quite the contrary. The instruments Christians are instructed to use in the struggle with evil are truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God and finally, prayer. We are talking about a spiritual struggle, not a military one.

So, first of all – truth, the belt of truth to keep everything in place. In a time when no one seems capable of being honest, when leaders at all levels of public life not only distort information but lie on a daily basis about things large and small, what a powerful force truth is, Gospel truth and just plain, ordinary, everyday truth.

There was a time when someone's word meant something. This is why, in the Genesis narrative, when Isaac gives his blessing to the wrong son – Jacob instead of Esau – he cannot take it back. A person's word has to be trustworthy. It defines him/her. But times have changed. We have contracts for everything because no one's word means anything and even the contracts are broken. It is no way to live. Even in

raising children, honesty is paramount. If we don't have the truth, we don't know what else we do or don't have. Dishonesty is an evil force. Those who pursue the good and noble put on the belt of truth.

Second, there is righteousness, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield that protects us from mortal blows. In the simplest of terms, if we do the right things for the right reasons, we will not have to worry much about the unknown, at least as it concerns our integrity.

I had a student who was anxious after a seminary professor had a major moral failing that became public. The truth is this experience rocked the entire seminary community. It wasn't a matter of narrow moralistic judgment, but of basic human boundaries. So, this student wondered about the dangers before him in ministry. Trying to help, I suggested he have these words framed and placed over his desk – Just Don't Be An Idiot! I thought it was good advice until the student asked, "But how will I know?" Usually we know when we are being an idiot and when we are doing what is right. Those who pursue the good and noble put on the breastplate of righteousness.

Third, the text tells us to put on shoes to make us ready to proclaim the Gospel of peace, to do whatever it takes to get to where people are to make sure they know about the kind of shalom or deep-down sense of peace and wholeness that is available in Christ.

It sounds like the author has been reading our communications and getting in on the idea of a ministry with community. I say *ministry* and not *minister*, though we are considering the call of a *minister* today and are very excited about that. But this minister, Leah, is not the only one called to take the Gospel of peace in all its fullness into the world. The letter to the Ephesians is written for all of us. And in being true to our calling to proclaim and embody the Good News of Jesus, we stand firm.

Fourth, we are counseled to take the shield of faith so as to quench the flaming arrows of evil. We might imagine those arrows in many different ways, but faith here is seen as a defensive weapon. So, what threatens us most in regard to our identity in Christ? Is it questions and doubts that arise out of suffering, our own or someone else's? Is it the temptation to be an idiot, to do something we know is wrong or to be someone we are not? Is it the quest for certainty that can masquerade as

faith but is actually the enemy of faith? Whatever flaming arrows come our way, the defense is faith, not just head knowledge, but trust in God.

The fifth strategy, which is related, is the helmet of salvation, our assurance of grace in Christ which nothing can take away, and the sixth is a more offensive weapon – the word of God which is envisioned here, as in the book of Hebrews, as a sword (4:12). There is nothing quite so powerful in the struggle that matters most as the words of scripture, so long as we understand that their purpose is to impart grace.

To speak of scripture as a sword, especially given our history of crusades and inquisitions, is a bit dangerous. The author of Ephesians is not thinking about coercing people to believe, overcoming evil with force. This is not Jesus' way. His way is to lay down life in sacrificial love. The counsel is to allow God's word in a metaphorical sense to penetrate hardened hearts so as to open them up to love.

Finally, and this is a word Paul uses often, we are counseled to pray, at all times, for Paul and others, specifically for boldness to proclaim the Gospel. It is instructive to compare the things biblical characters pray for with what we tend to pray for on a daily basis. We pray for health and comfort, for success and wellbeing, for things to go our way. Biblical characters pray for boldness in faith.

This doesn't mean we are wrong to pray for what we do. Prayer is about honest conversation with God and God knows and cares about our every need. I once knew a minister who insisted that we should never pray for people we love to get well. I disagreed passionately! But might we expand the focus of our prayer to include the condition of the world and our role in partnering with God to heal it?

And so, these are our strategies of engagement, our weapons to employ in the struggle between good and evil – truth, righteousness, proclamation, faith, salvation, scripture and prayer. When we consider the forces we are contending with, it's like Frodo heading to Mordor with just his little knife of a sword and a friend or Luke taking on the Empire with just a lightsaber and his trust in some nebulous thing called the force. And yet, these tools are all we need if The Force we trust is real, if God is real, which of course, God is.