

Fight the Good Fight
Ephesians 6:10-20
2 Timothy 4:1-8

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 6:10-20

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 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.

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. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 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. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 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.

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

2 Timothy 4:1-8

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.

For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.

As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

The Bible was written by people who had been conquered. Over and over again. This can make it difficult for us Americans, who have never been a conquered people, to really

understand.¹ The passage that Sheridan read, about the whole armor of God, has been misinterpreted and taken out of context more times than I can count.

The writer of Ephesians² says clearly and unequivocally that, “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh.” This letter is not about armies marching and conquering their enemies. People who have been conquered see armies marching differently than do the people who send those armies. Obviously, they see them as a bad thing.

Even though the letter says that “our struggle is ... against the rulers, against the authorities,” there is no call here to stockpile shields and swords for a rebellion against the Roman Empire. The Christian Church, at the time this was written, was a bunch of mostly poor people, financially supported largely by an informal network of rich women who let the church meet in their houses. The Roman legions were the mightiest military force the world had, at that time, ever seen. They would have gone through any army the Church could raise like a sword through butter.

The writer of Ephesians is talking about spiritual protections and spiritual warfare. He describes the armor worn by a Roman legionnaire: belt and breastplate, shoes, a shield and helmet, and a sword. If this writer were writing today, he would write about Kevlar and steel, rather than bronze and iron.

¹ For more on this topic, see Rob Bell, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians: A Manifesto for the Church in Exile*.

² Ephesians is what Biblical scholars call “deutero-Pauline,” meaning that it was credited to Paul but he probably did not write it. I am going to use “he” to describe this author, to avoid jarring the congregation, but we do not even know for certain that the writer was a man. What we know is that the Church, for millennia, has found spiritual truth in this letter.

What kind of armor do you put on for a battle against “the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places?”

You start with truth. Not only telling the truth, but looking for it and listening to it when you find it. We do nobody any favors by being blind to what is happening around us. We were born as human beings, not ostriches, and when we stick our heads in the sand to avoid seeing what’s coming at us, rather than face the truth head-on, we abandon the protections that God has made for us.

Likewise, when we do not tell the truth because we are afraid to, we abandon our proper place and our proper role as Christians. The whole reason that we have the armor of God is to protect us when we tell the truth. We do not have to be mean about it, but we do have to speak the truth.

It is not acceptable to say, “It’s just business,” or, “It’s just politics.” It is not acceptable to say that, “Ethical conduct has nothing to do with the law.”³ If we accept those excuses from our business leaders, from our politicians, or from ourselves, then we are failing in our call to bring the word of God to the world.

To truth you add righteousness. Righteousness, which, you notice, the author has protecting your heart and your other vital organs, is necessary to speak the truth. Striving for righteousness is part of what it is to be a Christian. The good news, as you know, is that, even though we will never completely achieve it on our own, Christ gives us enough. Christ is enough for all of us, for every Christian who ever lived.

³ Nameless political spokesman quoted in Michael Longcor, “Building Fires,” *Dangerous Heroes* (1996).

You put on whatever shoes prepare you to preach the gospel of peace. For some of you, that may be sneakers. For others, wingtips or high heels. For others, it might be comfortable flats, or steel-toed engineer boots. However you are dressed, stay grounded and preach God's good news of *Shalom* – peace and abundance. Preach it with your life. Use words if you must.

You take up the shield of faith, which protects you against the flaming arrows of the Evil One. Remember what faith is – faith is not personal belief. Faith is not just your confidence in yourself, not just “your confidence in confidence alone.” True faith is relying on the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, who has promised that he will walk with us always, until the end of the age.

You take up the helmet of salvation. Helmets are important. They protect our brains, and their connection to the rest of our bodies, from harm. We have been saved, and that cannot be taken away from us. This is all about how do we respond to that astounding fact. We have our helmets to protect us.

You take up the sword of the Spirit. This is not a literal sword. This is not preparing to kill people to teach people not to kill people. This is the Word of God.

If we are fighting against the evil forces of this world, and, I assure you, they are always there, then the weapon we have is the Word of God. This is the Word of God that tells us to love God with all that we are, and that God wants peace and justice.⁴ This is the Word that tells us to love our neighbor, and that our neighbors include the people we most hate in all the world.⁵ This

⁴ Mark 12:30; Micah 6:8.

⁵ Luke 10: 25-37.

is the word that tells us God loved the *cosmos*⁶ enough to come down here, live and die for us, and told us to love others like he loves us.⁷

If we are putting God's Word into practice, then we push back evil in the world. That's how it works. Every time we feed someone who is hungry. Every time we are kind to someone, whether they deserve it or not. Every time we teach a child that a truly strong person is one who is strong enough to be gentle. Every time we stand with the weak when they are being oppressed by the strong.

The first and last thing you do, if you are fighting a battle against “the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places,” is you pray. Pray often. Pray constantly. Pray in the Spirit. Pray for God's will to be done, and then work to make it happen. As Pope Francis says, “You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That's how prayer works.”

In Paul's second letter to his protégé, Timothy, he tells him that he, Paul, has fought the good fight. He has fought the spiritual battles in this world. And Paul has done astounding things. He has traveled thousands of miles on foot, horseback, and small wooden ship. He has been shipwrecked three times on his journeys. He has survived beatings, a stoning, and several would-be executions.⁸ He has founded congregations that survive today, two thousand years later. But those are not the things that Paul is proud of. Those are not what he says he could boast about.

⁶ The original Greek word usually translated “the world” in John 3:16.

⁷ John 3:16; John 15:12-18.

⁸ 2 Corinthians 11.

No, what he could boast about is God's amazing love and faithfulness that had gotten him through all of that and more.⁹ With God's faithfulness and the protection that God gave him through the whole armor of God, Paul has finished the race we call life. He has kept the faith.

As I look around this room, I see many people who started fighting the good fight before I was even born. In many cases, that good fight has gone more rounds than you ever expected. I see many people who have kept the faith for a long time. You have built a congregation where there was no congregation. You have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick and the prisoner. You have fought for civil rights, not for yourselves, but for others of God's children. That is worthy of great respect. I rejoice in you and in all the amazing things that God has accomplished through you.

I see others who are just picking up the whole armor of God, and I rejoice in you. God will do great things through you.

But, if you are still here, then God is not done with you yet. The last bell has not rung; the good fight is not yet over. There are still hungry people in this world, and down the street. The strong still seek to oppress the weak, and they tend to succeed, unless someone stands up and does something.

As long as you are still here, God has a call for you. It's time to "polish [your] armor before the last fight."¹⁰

⁹ 2 Corinthians 11-12.

¹⁰ Michael Longcor, "Building Fires," *op. cit.*

Just remember: God has given you the whole armor of God: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God. To fight the good fight, you'll never last unless you put it all on.

AMEN.