

Sermon for September 6, 2015 - 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Ephesians 6:10-20 NIV84

Theme: **Are you ready for battle? You are if you . . .**

1. Understand your enemy
2. Arm yourself for the conflict
3. Stay in communication with your commander

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For 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. 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. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Let me tell you a true story: A certain, foolish soldier was sent to a dangerous country much like Afghanistan. Because he was told that the very people he was supposed to liberate hated him, he was always on guard – expecting an attack at any moment.

But the attacks never came. Sure, maybe he heard a gun shot every once in a while, but nothing major. Over time, then, this soldier became complacent. He stopped wearing his armor. Why? Because all that equipment was heavy, uncomfortable and seemingly unnecessary. There was no real danger, was there? None that he could see.

Now, what do you think about that soldier's attitude? Certainly it was by God's grace that he hadn't been killed! What was he thinking?! Everyone knows that the deadliest enemies don't attack right away, but hide: waiting and watching for us to let our guard down. Neither you nor I would be so stupid as to leave off our life-saving equipment in such a dangerous place, would we?

Since this is a true story, let me tell you who the foolish soldier is? It's you and me! Let me explain what I mean.

God has called all Christians to active duty with the mission of liberating souls from Satan. Even though the major conflict of this war has already been won by Christ, the very people we are trying to liberate are blinded by the devil's propaganda. Like our soldiers in Afghanistan, we constantly

face danger on this earth. No, attacks don't occur all the time, but they certainly do come – most often when we least expect it and are ill-prepared.

All of us probably personally know a solid Christian, who got picked off by Satan and fell away from their faith.

Think about them for a moment.

What was their problem? They were not prepared. What about you? **Are you prepared for battle? St. Paul says you are if:** 1) *You understand your enemy, and respect the danger he poses,* 2) *Arm yourself for the conflict with the superior armor and weapons God has given you, and* 3) *Stay in communication with Jesus, the Commander of the Lord's Army.*

Part One: Understand your enemy.

God has liberated us from our sins through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and He wants us to use that same Gospel to liberate others. This is the mission to which we, Christians, have been called.

Now, in any war, one of the most important things a soldier needs to know is who his enemies are and of what they're capable. The worst enemy a soldier can have is a hidden one. This is the kind of enemy we have. Paul reminds us of this fact, when he writes:

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. For 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 does Paul mean when He says that our fight is against “*the rulers, authorities, and powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*”? It means that our fight is against the devil and all the demons of hell who are allied with this wicked world and our own sinful flesh! Our war is spiritual. We are not fighting stupid, powerless enemies, but crafty ones who are well equipped, numerous and trained.

One of the greatest tricks Al-Qaeda used before 9/11 was being so hidden that many questioned the terrorist group's existence. This secrecy allowed them to launch a horrible attack against our nation 14 years ago. In a similar way, the devil also convinces people that he doesn't exist so as to attack when we least expect it.

Oh, how I wish that the devil was a visible dragon for all to see! Why? Because a giant, horrific monster would be a lot easier to fight and avoid, than the devil's true form of being a spirit and hidden. If we would spend time considering the true power and craftiness of our enemy, we would soon realize that we, by ourselves, are outmatched and in serious danger.

And that's exactly the point God wants us to know. He doesn't want us to live our lives spiritually naked – vulnerable to every attack. He wants us to face our daily battles in His strength and clothed in the armor He so graciously provides.

Part 2: Arm yourself for the conflict.

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.

From goggles to galoshes, each piece of a soldier's gear is vitally important – ready to both help him accomplish his mission and save his life. For this reason, a soldier needs to know what his equipment is for and how to use it. And if this is true for earthly warfare, how much more true is it in regard to our spiritual fight.

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.

The first piece of equipment Paul mentions is the *belt of truth*. An armored belt was important to the Roman soldier for two reasons: 1) It protected his abdomen from an upward sword thrust. 2) It tied his armor together – keeping it in place.

Many Christians think that truth is whatever they “feel” is true; but this is not the case. If they thus play fast and loose with the truth, they won't have the rest of their armor properly fitted. The devil will see this and attack where they're unprotected.

Retaining the truth is, therefore, vitally important. And what is truth? It is the Gospel (God's Word) with nothing added to or subtracted from it, and none of its meaning changed. Keeping the truth makes sure that Jesus' righteousness is always covering us, and not flopping around, leaving us exposed to a deadly attack.

How do we buckle the truth around us? By studying God's Word and making sure that it alone decides our doctrine and faith. This will keep the rest of our spiritual armor in order.

Paul mentions the *breastplate of righteousness* next. A breastplate is very important - protecting the heart from a direct hit.

What is the breastplate of righteousness? It is Jesus' perfect record of keeping the law. It is the righteousness that He won for us on the cross. Having Jesus' record covering our heart through faith means that, whenever Satan slices at us with his sword of guilt, Christ's righteousness covers us and assures us that we stand forgiven and loved by God.

The next piece of equipment is having our *feet fitted* with the proper footwear that keeps us running to accomplish our mission. And what is that? It's our desire to share the *gospel of peace* at all times in all places with all people. Christ's love compels us to love others - running to tell them

the good news of great joy. This joy in the Gospel helps us stand firm in the heat of battle. It leads us to confess with the apostles: *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”* (Romans 1:16, NIV84)

In addition to all this, Paul says, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. The shield the apostle references here is a large, rectangular shield Roman soldiers used to protect themselves as they advanced in ranks against an enemy. Whenever an arrow attack came, they could hide under these shields, and the arrow attack was rendered useless.

Our faith shields us from both the temptations and accusations Satan hurls at us. How does it do that? Well, faith is a God-given confidence in everything He promises us, especially the promise about our sins being forgiven in Christ! When we look to God in trust, we duck under our shield, and the flaming arrows of the devil are rendered absolutely useless.

Paul says: *Take the helmet of salvation.* One solid blow to the head can kill a person instantly. This is why our brains ought to always be occupied with the salvation Jesus won for us on the cross. Do what he will, the devil can not kill those who find their refuge in Christ’s saving work.

Finally, Paul tells us to take up *the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.* Our weapon is not human reason to convince people that there is a “god”. Our weapon is not government law forcing people to be Christian. No, our weapon (like our armor) is spiritual because our enemy is spiritual. Our weapon is God’s Word. We wield it by studying, remembering and proclaiming it. This *sword of the Spirit* is powerful enough to slice through even the toughest spiritual armor - as the author of the letter to the Hebrews writes: *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.* (Hebrews 4:12, NIV84)

This is the full armor God gives us for our battles. Oh, how foolish we are in that we often don’t use all the items God puts at our disposal. Sometimes we neglect setting aside time to read God’s Word or coming to Church. In doing so, we forfeit our weapon. Other times, we are tempted not to hold on to the truth, and thus loosen our armor. How many times are we less than eager to spread the Gospel? Yes, we are foolish soldiers – often neglecting to use the divine equipment God has given us. For this we ought to repent – realizing the danger into which we put ourselves. Thanks be to Christ that He forgives our sin – even our sin of complacency. In the peace of this forgiveness let us don the great armor God has given us, using it in our fight - no longer leaving our souls open to attack.

Part Three: Stay in communication with your commander.

Now that we know our enemy and are armed for the fight, there is one more piece of encouragement Paul gives us to be truly ready for battle. Guess what a soldier’s most important piece of equipment is? The radio. Why? Because, it allows a soldier to call for help, support, medical equipment, air strikes . . . you name it! A soldier can also relay information for another

group so that they can be helped. You can almost say that the radio puts a nation's entire arsenal at a soldier's disposal.

Paul tells us: *pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.*

Prayer is our means of communicating to God, and puts His entire army at our disposal. This is why Paul encourages us to pray at all times and in every situation – informing God of everything that is going on in both your life and in the lives of others. God wants us to call upon him in every trouble, and not face our battles alone. He wants us to be well equipped and supported, and this is why we pray.

Therefore, pray for both yourself and every other Christian soldier in this Church. Pray when fellow Christians are in a fierce firefight with the devil. Pray when the fight is going either poorly or well. Pray in times of both war and peace - always rejoicing in Jesus, your commander and chief who protects you.

And I, as your pastor, ask that you pray for me too – just as St. Paul asked the Ephesians: *“Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.”*

Yes, pray for me that I too might be fearless, that words may be given me whenever I open my mouth to speak, because the devil likes tempting me with fear: the fear of saying the wrong thing or of offending a person by what I say. I need the Lord's strength and your prayers help greatly.

Dear Christian, you and I are at war. We are in hostile territory, far from our home of heaven. Let us not continue being foolish soldiers. Let us be wise in Christ. Are you ready for battle? You are if you know your enemy, arm yourself for the battle, and stay in communication with your commander. Having prepared in such a fashion, you can go out through those doors - ready to fight. Remember the victory is already won. We are just rescuing those still caught under Satan's tyranny, waiting for the final trumpet call home. Amen.