

Deliver Us from Evil

Ephesians 6:10-20

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ September 27, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak. (Ephesians 6:10-20, NRSV)

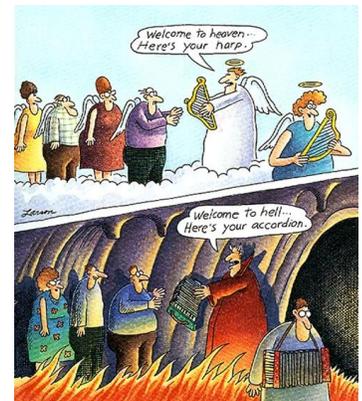
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One day Jesus' friends asked him to teach them how to pray. He did. In fact, he gave them a prayer we now know as the Lord's Prayer. The prayer begins with praise, naming God as a Father in heaven whose name ought to be lifted up in reverence. The prayer ends, however, with the devil. Of course, we normally end the prayer with these words, "for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen", but that last part was added on by the church later. When Jesus originally taught us the prayer he ended it this way: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." We say "evil" but that's also not quite right. The text literally says "evil one," which means that when Jesus taught us to pray he suggested that when we pray our prayers ought to conclude by asking for protection from the devil. It's as if Jesus wants us to have this note of caution on our minds when we finish our prayers and go out into the day.

Can it be any coincidence that as Paul wraps up his letter to the Ephesians he closes on a similar note? Of all the topics he could have chosen as the culmination of his letter, Paul, like Jesus, chooses to close with a warning to disciples about the evil one.

And some among us want to say, "Seriously? We're supposed to be concerned about the devil? We're going to worry about some red guy with horns and a pitchfork running around the world trying to get us to smoke, and drink, and steal, and lie, and take vacations in Las Vegas?" And this is part of the problem. When we see the devil portrayed in our time it's often cartoonish. Sometimes it's literally cartoonish. This is the sort of hijinks the devil is up to, trying to subject us all to playing the accordion? How can we take this threat seriously?

But Jesus, and Paul after him, were deadly serious when they talked about the devil. And in all seriousness, one of the most common ways the devil deceives us is to lull us into not taking him seriously. In his classic work *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis once famously wrote, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or magician with the same delight."



I would suggest that most of us here are liable to make the first error because we live in such a highly materialistic culture. If we can't see it we don't believe it, and any talk about spiritual forces at work behind the scenes in ways that

science cannot monitor or measure is ridiculed these days as superstition. As Lewis also once suggested, we find it impossible to believe in the unfamiliar while the familiar is constantly before our eyes.¹

We also live in what has been called a highly therapeutic culture.² When we try to address what we see is wrong in the world we resist speaking about sin and evil and prefer to talk about how people are broken, or unrealized in their potential, or misguided, or even under-medicated.

In a recent article in *Leadership Journal* on the topic of evil, John Ortberg recalls an encounter psychiatrist Scott Peck had with a depressed 15-year-old named Bobby who was increasingly troubled after his 16-year-old brother killed himself with a .22 rifle. Ortberg writes,

Peck tried to probe Bobby's mind, but got nowhere. Searching for ways to establish a bond, he asked what Bobby had received from his parents for Christmas. "A gun," Bobby said. Peck was stunned. "What kind?"

"A .22."

More stunned. "How did it make you feel, getting the same kind of gun your brother killed himself with?" "It wasn't the same kind of gun." Peck felt better.

"It was the same gun."

Bobby had been given, as a Christmas present, by his parents, the gun his brother used to kill himself. When Peck met with the parents, what was most striking was their deliberate refusal to acknowledge any wrongdoing on their part. They would not tolerate any concern for their son, or any attempt to look at moral reality.

Two decades later and after his conversion to Christianity, Peck wrote about this encounter: "One thing has changed in twenty years. I now know Bobby's parents were evil. I did not know it then. I felt their evil but had no vocabulary for it. My supervisors were not able to help me name what I was facing. The name did not exist in our professional vocabulary. As scientists rather than priests, we were not supposed to think in such terms."³

There has been a subtle but pervasive movement in Western culture since the Enlightenment to dismiss any talk of evil or of an evil one. The problem is that it's only a matter of time before some horrific event or another, some holocaust, some terrorist act, some vile abuse of children, some widespread system of economic or political injustice, or even some wretched motivation or impulse we find within our very own minds or hearts forces us to acknowledge what we have tried so hard to dismiss. Evil is real. It exists and it is horribly destructive.

The Bible acknowledges evil and the evil one from the very first pages of Genesis when it slithers into paradise to corrupt humanity and creation, to the final pages of Revelation when the great and future cosmic struggle between good and evil is foretold. What the Bible so plainly recognizes, and what Jesus and Paul taught should be on our minds as we go into each day, is ignored by us at our own peril.

This is why Paul chooses to culminate his letter with these words, "**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.**" Almost in the same breath, however, Paul is quick to warn that our battle here is not against people. He writes, "**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.**"

People, of course, may be influenced by or even possessed by evil in our world – to some extent we all are! – but people are never our enemy. In fact, Jesus repeatedly taught his followers to pray for their enemies and to love their enemies. If we are Jesus' followers we must ask for his help to pray for and love even the people in this world who would destroy

¹ Also from *Screwtape Letters*.

² I'm borrowing this phrase from John Ortberg as cited in his excellent article, "Fighting the Good Fight: What Does the Bible Mean by 'Spiritual Warfare' (*Leadership Journal*, Spring 2012).

³ Ortberg, *Fighting the Good Fight*.

us if given the chance. They are not the true enemy. There are rulers and authorities, cosmic and unseen spiritual forces, which are working to spread darkness in our world and which, in many cases, are seeing quite a bit of success.

In the Bible the name Satan is a Hebrew word that means adversary. The evil one is an enemy of God and of all who honor and worship God. His attack may be overt, using human authorities or governments to prevent God's people from living out their faith or spreading the good news to those who have not yet heard. His attack may also be subtle as he slyly distracts the church from its God-given mission to make disciples and serve the poor, keeping us busy instead with other seemingly good but largely trivial activities.

In the Bible the name Devil is a Greek word that means slanderer. The evil one is also a liar, sometimes even called the Father of Lies in scripture.⁴ When he first comes on the scene with Adam and Eve he's spewing out lies, distorting God's Word, twisting the truth. And he's been doing it ever since, often successfully convincing us that beliefs and behaviors God calls destructive are actually worthy of our embrace.

Paul makes clear that the church is in a battle with this enemy. And I know some of us are immediately turned off by the militaristic imagery that Paul employs here, but we must remember that Paul is not talking about physical warfare but spiritual warfare. What the Bible has to say about war is another topic for another day. This is not Paul's focus here. He's merely using the analogy of war to help us understand just how high the stakes are and just how fierce the struggle will be when we face evil.

Of course, the analogy may not impact us as much as Paul would like because most of us have been so removed from the reality of war. Furthermore, war has been so glorified and romanticized in video games and movies that we, many of us, fail to grasp the severity of it all. I still remember the first time I watched the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. The opening scene in that movie depicts the assault on Omaha Beach on D-Day by Allied troops in World War II and gave such a graphic realistic picture of the violence and devastation of war that my view of war was forever changed. It was the first time in my life that I began to really see why people have long said that war is hell. This is the analogy Paul uses to help us understand the seriousness of this spiritual struggle we face.

Of course, to call it a war is not quite right. Truth is, the war is over. When Jesus died on the cross and then three days later rose from the dead, our greatest enemies of sin and death were forever vanquished. There is no mystery surrounding the question of who is the victor in this war, and that fact alone ought to fill us with great hope. The evil one has no chance and he knows it. That does not mean, however, that the devil is willing to go away quietly into the night.

I just finished a remarkable biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who was martyred in Nazi Germany for his role in the resistance against Hitler.⁵ Bonhoeffer was executed two weeks before the Allied forces liberated the concentration camp at Flossenburg where he was taken as a prisoner for the last hours of his life. Many, many others were also executed in similar camps during the final days of the war even though Hitler knew by then that defeat was inevitable. The evil in him and others around him simply wanted to take down as many others along with them as they could. This is not all that different from the devil, who has already been beaten but will continue to battle to the last possible moment to destroy and mislead as much of God's creation as possible.

If we are to withstand this final desperate assault, Paul says that we will need protection. **“Therefore,”** he writes, **“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.”** Notice that Paul does not say, “Since you have been fitted with the armor of God, relax. You're protected.” Yes, God has equipped us with everything we need to remain firm in the face of evil, but we aren't born wearing this armor. We have to put it on. Never can we plead, “The devil made me do it.” God doesn't let us off the hook like that. As one writer put it, “We cannot attempt to diminish human responsibility by blaming supernatural evil.”⁶ God has indeed provided the protection we need, his armor which is forged in heaven, but with his help we must do whatever we can to make sure that protection is firmly in place. If it's not, we have no excuse. It's only when we neglect God's gift of protection that evil can have its way with us.

⁴ See John 8:44.

⁵ I highly recommend this book by Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

⁶ John Ortberg, *Fighting the Good Fight*.

Paul maximizes his analogy here by going through the parts of armor which would have been familiar to the people of his day to teach us the sorts of protection God has provided. Though there is material here for many more sermons, let me just take a few minutes to touch on each piece of armor.

Paul first tells us, **“fasten the belt of truth around your waist.”** With God’s help we must never lose track of the fact that the most important thing about the message of the Christian Gospel is that it is true. Yes, it will be questioned. Doubts will come. Lies will twist. But we must never give up on the authenticity of the message. God actually does love the world. Jesus really did come, and die and rise again from the dead. If we had been there we would have seen it with our own eyes. And he really is coming back one day to set all things right. The truth of the Gospel, like a belt, is what holds everything else together.

Next, we are to **“put on the breastplate of righteousness.”** Perhaps the greatest lie that the evil one will try to spread among us in the church is the lie that there is still more we need to do to gain the forgiveness of God. Against this lie Paul wrote in Romans 8, **“Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one.”**⁷ In Christ we have already been made righteous, not by our good works but by His good work. Let this truth, like a breastplate, protect your heart against the lies of the evil one who will try to convince you that you remain condemned.

Then, **“As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.”** Because of the justifying work of Christ there is now peace between us and God and peace between us, one to another. But the evil one is committed to doing whatever he can to bring division, especially division in the church. We pass the peace every single week in worship to be reminded that the things which might otherwise divide us no longer, in Christ, have the power to do so. Wherever our feet carry us, let us be quick to share this message 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.” In Paul’s day an enemy would dip an arrow in pitch and then light it on fire before they shot it. For this reason soldiers carried body-length shields that would completely protect them from these flaming missiles.⁸ The flaming arrows the evil one will shoot our way take many forms: doubt, despair, grief, sharp temptation, personal tragedy, or even personal success which may fill us with a sense of self-sufficient pride. Remember that faith is the dependence on God when it doesn’t make sense to depend on God. Faith is not following God in the absence of doubt or hardship for when God seems close and all is well, faith is not needed. Faith, rather, is following God in the midst of doubt and hardship and this faith, in the end, will never be clung to in vain.

After that, Paul says, **“Take the helmet of salvation.”** Though there is so much good in our world which can be celebrated, there is also so much that is wrong with our world. And for some people, many people, what is wrong can begin to overwhelm us so that in our minds we cannot begin to work out how things will ever get better. We must, however, hold tightly to the promise that even though the battle rages on, sometimes as fierce as ever, the war is already over. Victory belongs to God. Salvation is assured. In time, all things will be made right through Christ.

Finally, Paul tells us to take the **“sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”** This is, you may have noticed, the only offensive weapon Paul mentions. It is indispensable and its use is extraordinarily practical, as demonstrated by Jesus himself. When Jesus was led into the desert to be tempted by the devil, do you remember how Jesus responded to each of the devil’s temptations?⁹ With scripture. The devil would twist the truth and Christ would respond with the truth from God’s Word, thrown back in the devil’s face. This is our model. Along with many of you, I have learned to read, and recite, and pray God’s Word during those times in life when I sense attack. When we do, the impact can be immediate and devastating. This is the devil’s kryptonite. The evil one cannot stand in the face of God’s Word declared in faith.

Even though Paul doesn’t assign it a metaphorical piece of armor – maybe he ran out! – he does mention one last critical piece of protection God has given us. He writes, **“Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.”**

⁷ Romans 8:33-34, NIV.

⁸ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 281.

⁹ See Matthew 4:1-11

Of course, along with his Word, God has also given us the gift of prayer, an open invitation to constantly turn to him for help when we are under attack. I'm reminded again here of how Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one." That word deliver is a strong word. Literally, it means "snatch." It's almost a violent image.¹⁰ Think of how you would react if your small child was being led over a cliff or into a busy street. This is how Jesus tells us to pray to God in this battle, to plead with God that he would snatch us away from the brink of evil's destructive power. When we pray, God will respond.

Archbishop William Temple once said that when he prayed 'coincidences' tended to happen and when he stopped praying 'coincidences' stopped happening. It's like the golfer who was once accused of being lucky. He didn't disagree but only responded by saying that he noticed that the more he practiced the luckier he seemed to get.¹¹ In the same way, the more we can take up this practice of prayer, not only on our knees as we begin or finish the day, but all along throughout the day, the more we will find God 'coincidentally' intervening along the way with strength, and grace, and freedom, and power. As our fall retreat speaker Dale Bruner encouraged us, make your prayers throughout the day brief, intense and frequent, praying when you face temptation, for people you meet along the way, for thanks when you see goodness, for help when you find trouble, for patience when you're about to lose it, for love when your heart seems hard. In a battle a soldier is always alert. Prayer is our way of staying alert.

Once again, evil exists. The evil one is real and is bent on wreaking havoc in our lives. God has given us protection, however – truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, his Word, and prayer – and these are more than enough to keep us strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Let us not pay too much attention to the devil. The Bible doesn't. There are, in fact, dozens and dozens of references in scripture to God for every one reference to the devil. That doesn't mean, however, that the Bible ignores the devil altogether. Jesus himself taught us to end our prayers with a plea for God to snatch us away from the evil one's grasp. Paul essentially does the same thing here.

You should know, by the way, that this is often how I end my prayers for you. It hadn't occurred to me until this week when I was preparing for this sermon how over the years when I have prayed for this church I nearly always end those prayers with a plea for protection. Know that I have been praying for, and will continue to pray for, your protection from all evil that will come against us to deceive and divide and discourage and destroy.

I invite you to pray with me in this way – for our leaders, for our children and youth, for the plans we are making, for our ministry here, for our marriages and families, for forgiveness among us, for the sick, for those who doubt, for those trapped in addiction or shame or guilt, and for those who have no idea they are even under attack in the first place. As Paul encourages us here, let us pray hard and long in the Spirit, especially for our brothers and sisters in the church, that not even one among us would be overcome, or fall behind, or God forbid drop out altogether.

Amen.



The Next Step **A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application**

1. Read Ephesians 6:1-20. What first stands out to you from this passage?
2. What do you believe about the Devil? C.S. Lewis once said, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them." Which of these two errors do you tend to make?
3. If the devil has already been defeated, why does he still have so much influence in the world?
4. Do you agree with Paul that the spiritual life is like a battle between good and evil? Why or why not?

¹⁰ Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 314.

¹¹ Both these references were borrowed from N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 78).

5. As you consider the “armor” God has for you to put on for spiritual battle, which parts are in good shape? Which parts have you neglected?
6. Most of God’s spiritual armor for us is defensive in nature. The sword, however, which represents the Word of God, is an offensive weapon. How can God’s Word be used to ‘attack’ evil in our world?
7. I Peter 5:8-9 reads, “Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.” What do we learn here?
8. Re-read Paul’s teaching on prayer in verses 18-20. What’s the most important thing we learn here about prayer?



Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Who is more powerful, God or the devil? Why?