



**LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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Sermon for the Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity

Ephesians 6:10-17

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I want to look this morning at our Epistle lesson, taken chapter from six of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. This passage of Scripture about the "whole armour of God" is, I think, familiar to most, if not all, of us. This is where Paul warns us not only about being on guard against Satan and his schemes, but this is also where he actually tells us *how* to stay on guard—what tools to use and how to use them. But before we get into that passage I think it's important that we remember: Satan isn't our only enemy. We all struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. It's been my experience that many Christians attribute too much power and authority to Satan. Sometimes it seems as if we actually deify him—thinking of him as a god himself; as if he were simply God's opposite. We treat him as if he and his army of fallen angels are all-knowing and omnipresent and forget that they're creatures like us—part of the created order. Satan isn't a god. He's an angel—a fallen one—but still an angel. And he has a lot of fallen angels under his command, but their numbers are finite.

So when it comes to our struggle to be faithful followers of Jesus, I think it's safe to say that our first and most common enemies are the world and our own flesh. The world is full of fallen people, sinful philosophies, and temptations. And the fact is that even though we have been buried with Christ and raised to new life in him, we still carry around our "old man's" baggage of sinful, fleshly, selfish desires. Even if there were no devil at work today, you and I would still have

plenty to battle against in our fight for holiness. This is why I think it's safe to say that Satan isn't going to waste his limited time resources with people who aren't putting up much of a fight against the world and the flesh. He's got bigger fish to fry.

Brothers and sisters, would that you and I were those bigger fish. Once Christians put up a fight and once we take a stand for holiness; once we start overcoming the world and the flesh and once our Churches start taking a firm stand for the Gospel and for the Word of God; once we start truly living the Gospel in our lives and sharing it with others, that's when you can be guaranteed that Satan will fight back—because when we are walking in holiness, when we are standing firmly on God's Word, and when we are taking the Good News into his kingdom, that's when he starts losing ground. I think that's why Paul talks about the armour of God and about taking a stand against the enemy here in Ephesians. He'd just been addressing their problems and he'd just been making sure they had the Gospel right in their thinking—and if they did, then it was a sure thing that they could expect Satan's opposition—and they'd better be prepared. In verses 10-13 Paul writes:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

We all struggle. Sometimes it's our daily struggle to personally fight and overcome the sin in our lives. Sometimes it's our struggle to find assurance of our salvation or of God's

presence with us when times are tough. Sometimes it's the discouraging things that happen within the Church, when brothers and sisters choose to fight with each other instead of against our common Enemy. Here St. Paul gives us both our assurance and our marching orders. "Don't be strong in yourselves," he says, "but be strong in the Lord and in his might!" Remember that the last couple of Sundays I've been talking about the necessity of relying on God and not on ourselves. When we struggle we have assurance because we know that it's God doing the work, not we ourselves. And so here he tells us to put on *his* armour and to pick up *his* weapons.

Paul's first point is that God's armour is necessary. Whether you look at it from the standpoint of our own weakness or the strength of our enemy, we can't fight, let alone win, the battle with what we've got on our own. Think about the fact that as men and women we can't even so much as think a good thought or do a good deed. Our nature and our wills are inclined to nothing but sin. The first thing we have to do is to be strong in the Lord. This is the God of whom David wrote, "Blessed be the LORD, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle" (Psalm 144:1). Jesus Christ is our captain and as we go into battle he gives us his very self. We not only put on the armour he gives us, but he also calls us to "put on himself" so that we can be "strong in the power of his might."

Our battle isn't against the powers of this world so much as it's against the one who came craftily in the Garden as a serpent and whom, after his thousands of years of experience at deceiving the human race, the book of Revelation tells us has become a great dragon. He works through deception. As evil as he is, he comes looking like an angel of light. He whispers things into our ears, just as he did with Eve, and helps us rationalize our sins – to twist sin into virtue – and then when we finally realize our sins for what they are, he accuses us, whispering in

our ears that we're not good enough to fight on God's side as the battle rages.

St. Peter describes our enemy as a lion on the prowl, just looking for whomever he can devour. The point is to discourage us. Scripture warns us over and over about our Enemy – not so that we'll feel afraid or discouraged, but to show us just how urgent it is that we join the battle. St. Paul warns us, not so that we'll go run and hide, but to exhort us “to withstand in the evil day” and “to stand firm.”

His second point is that this armour is God's armour and not our own. Jeremiah wrote, “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD” (Jeremiah 17:5). The strength of the flesh is nothing more than the strength of our Enemy who is the prince of this world. David wrote in Psalm 20, “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.” That's the key. St. Paul exhorted the Corinthians saying, “For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:4). We go out to battle against the darkness. Let us first put on the armour of light! When the Enemy tempts us to cruelty, to pride, to selfishness or any other sin, let us respond with “humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love” as the Apostle tells us in Chapter 4.

Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth [against the lies and false doctrines of our Enemy], **and having put on the breastplate of righteousness** [against our sins and our sin nature], **and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace** [to remind us that our righteousness is not our own]. **In all circumstances take up the shield of faith** [against our infidelity], **with**

which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation [which gives us our hope], **and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel.** (Ephesians 6:14-20)

St. Paul's third point is that we need to put on *all* or the *whole* armour of God. It isn't enough to just put on the belt of truth or the breastplate of righteous. You can't expect to win the battle with the shield of faith, but not the sword of truth. Imagine a knight going off to battle with a shield, but no sword. Imagine a tank without a gun on top or a bomber with no bombs. But notice that there *is* one piece of armour missing. There's a helmet for the head, a breastplate for the body, and shoes for the feet – and there's a shield that can cover everything in the front, but Paul doesn't mention a backplate. The armour of God doesn't have a defensive piece to cover our backs. Why? Because in the battle God calls us to fight, there's no turning back. Every soldier in God's army is called on to push forward against the enemy, or at worst to stand his ground.

In 1066 when William the Conqueror landed with his troops in England, the first action he took was to burn all of his ships. He didn't want his troops retreating back to Normandy. He gave them one choice: fight on or die. God tells us that we are either for him or against him. There's no fence-sitting. There are no neutral parties in this war. Once we make Christ our Lord and Master there's no going back

It's also telling that Paul talks about the shield of faith. Not the helmet or the breastplate or the shoes of faith;

the *shield* of faith. You see, the helmet only covers the head. The breastplate only covers the breast and the shoes only cover the feet, but the shield covers the whole body. You can move it up and you can move it down. In every temptation and in every battle with the Enemy we need to put faith first and foremost – having a lively faith that assures us with confidence. Without that the rest – the helmet, the breastplate, and the shoes – is all worthless. Without faith, the sword of the spirit is no Scripture. Without faith, the belt of truth can never be truth for us. Without faith the breastplate of righteousness is really unrighteousness. We've talked about this before. All of these other things only fall into place in the presence of a true and lively faith generated in our hearts by the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. Without faith it's impossible to please God, but without it, it's also impossible to resist the Enemy. So pick up the shield of faith so that you can douse all the “flaming darts” of the Evil One. He throws his darts at us and they're both sharp and fiery. If we don't have the shield of faith, they strike and they go deep – and, like all sin, their fire spreads. One sin leads to another bigger one until the entire body is on fire with sinful passions. St. John reminds us that the entire world lies in wickedness, set on fire by the devil, who is the author of all wickedness and sin – all the fiery works of the world. But he exhorts us saying, “For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 John 5:4).

But notice that the armour of God isn't all defensive. If we are to put on the *whole* armour, St. Paul also tells us that we are to take up the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. The writer of Hebrews tells us that sword is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of

joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). The Word of God, which was written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and which works in our hearts by his moving is what opens our eyes to sin. That sword, sharp as a razor, cuts deep and excises the sin in our lives and trains us in holiness. Does the flesh tempt you to sexual impurity? Strike with the sword: 1 Thessalonians 4:3, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.” Do you struggle with worldliness? Strike with the sword: 1 John 2:15, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” Does Satan make an assault on your faith and tempt you to superstition or idolatry? Strike with the sword: Matthew 4:10, You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.” Are you tempted to give up the fight and lose hope? Strike with the sword: 1 Corinthians 15:54-56, “When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The shield of faith defends the Christian soldier from the attacks of the Enemy, but we’re not called to duck and cover. With the sword of the Spirit we charge forward to take him on. In Canada the government is gradually chipping away at our freedom to preach the Word of God freely and unfettered. There’s a sense in which we can rejoice in that. It means we’re doing what we’re supposed to be doing and the Enemy doesn’t like it. The last thing the he wants is for God’s arsenal to be opened up to his people. He wants us

stumbling around unprotected. So open the Scriptures. Read and study. Arm yourself with the sword of the Spirit!

Finally, it’s not enough to know God’s armour. *You have to put it on.* In the corner of my living room, leaning against the wall, is a Confederate officer’s sword from the Civil War. My great-great-Grandfather served the State of Alabama as an artillery officer. In his hands that sword was put to use. It doesn’t do much good now, just sitting in my living room. It looks neat. It’s a reminder of the past and of a cause long gone. Yet we tend to do the same thing with God’s armour. We know it, but we don’t use it. We don’t put it on. We know truth, but we don’t live by it. We have faith, but we forget about it and live as if we lack the hope that faith gives. We have the Gospel, but don’t tell anyone about it. We have a Bible, the sword of the Spirit, but it sits on the coffee table or on the nightstand collecting dust. That’s what the enemy wants! Complacent Christians who have all the head-knowledge, but never put it into actual practice – who don’t live it. Don’t get me wrong. You have to have the head-knowledge first. Without it the heart can never be given over to God and to his truth. But our problem is that the head-knowledge doesn’t make it to the heart.

A suit of armour makes a nice decoration. An old sword does too. But the whole armour of God was never meant to decorate the corner of the room. It was meant to be worn – to be put on and used. If the armour is on a stand in the corner, you can bet there’s a knight around somewhere doing anything but fighting a battle. You can’t do battle with the Enemy without the armour. Put it on and jump into the action! God has not only given us good armour to get the job done, he’s given us a good Captain to lead us, even the “Lord of hosts, who has all power and might.”

John Boys wrote, “The continuance of fight is little, but our reward great. In Rome the military age was from seventeen to forty-six.... The days of our age are threescore years and ten, and in all this time there is no time for peace; we are *legionum filii*, born in the field, and sworn soldiers in our swaddling clouts, always bearing arms against the common enemy from our holy baptism to burial.”

God’s going to do one of two things: either he’ll bring an end to the battle or he’ll end it for us individually by taking us home to be with him. We’ll be soldiers no more, because he’s promised that on that day he’s going to put palm branches in our hands and crowns on our heads as conquerors. St. Paul said, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

Please pray with me: Our Father, we give you thanks for the promise of victory over the enemy. Remind us to put on your armour daily and go to battle for the sake of the Gospel. Show us where we’re being complacent or fearful and give us the grace to strengthen us for the battle, through Jesus Christ we ask. Amen.