

Fighting the right battle

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[0 : 00] I was going to turn around eventually. So Ephesians 6, if you're there, chapter 6, verse 10, and the few verses that I would like to pay particular attention to, though having read to verse 20, is not so much the armor of God.

Over the years being here, I've preached several times on the importance of the armor of God and what the armor is and what it means for us and what the qualities there of each piece of armor represents or is as it applies to the Christian.

This evening, I'd much rather concentrate, and I would like your attention on those few verses, on rather the nature of the battle, the nature of the battle.

It follows that the armor is consistent with the battle that you're about to fight. If I can sort of illustrate just ever so briefly the distinction here, an important one, is if you were to go to do a job, and it's a new job, your employer or your boss, whoever it might be, might turn around and say to you, you know, thanks for turning up, but you're not wearing the right clothes.

We're going to have to change you so that you're ready to undertake what you're about to undertake. So back in the day, when you turn up on a building site, it was standard rules.

[1 : 44] You had to have a hard hat. You had to have steel toe cap boots, which were very difficult for roofers because you walked everywhere on your toes on a roof. And so we had special boots, or they were called trainers because no one above you, apart from God, could actually see that you were not wearing steel toe cap boots.

And the point here is, is that the job that you were doing came with a certain uniform, okay, that you needed this in order to do that. Well, what Paul is saying here is exactly the same thing.

You have a battle to fight that you may or may not be entirely aware of, and this is the armor that you need to be able to go out and stand firm in that battle.

You don't want to be undressed. You don't want to be caught off guard. You don't want to be in a position where you're not going to be equipped to be defensive against what is coming your way.

Now, we've spoken about that on several times in the past. We even addressed it when I did the whole series on the Holy Spirit, which you'll remember.

[2 : 56] I'm encouraged. But what I would like to focus on this evening is really the nature of the battle itself. So notice what Paul says here in verse 12, that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against rulers, against authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Now, if we stopped there, okay, there's something that you ought to be remembering. And so I'm going to have to remind you at least at this point, and that is you do wrestle against your flesh because Paul says that over in Galatians chapter 5.

And so the nature of the battle here, okay, the nature of the battle is twofold. On the one hand, we don't wrestle against flesh and blood in that we don't wrestle against people, and we don't wrestle against ourselves as in a person.

But we wrestle against the spiritual powers of darkness that are present in this age that just so happen to turn up in authorities and rulers and powers and so forth and so on.

But on the other hand, we do wrestle against flesh. Galatians chapter 5 is clearly a clear example where the Spirit of God wages war against our fleshly desires.

[4 : 25] We want to do one thing. We want to go somewhere. We have wills and desires that are not always consistent with God's will and desire, and the Spirit of God lets us know that.

So now we have two battles on our hand. We have the one battle, which is against the spiritual powers of darkness. And then we have another battle, which is against the flesh, our flesh desiring to do the things that God doesn't want us to do, and the Spirit convicting us in our life, wrestling with us so that we don't do those things, but we keep in step with the Spirit.

We produce the fruit of the Spirit. So the nature of the battle is not as simple or as straightforward as it might first appear.

But then there's a third battle. Now this is less obvious, but it's still one that needs to be pointed out. So the first two, the spiritual powers of this present age, okay, in the heavenlies, you know, where they are.

Then we have the battles against the flesh, that is, the desires and the will of people, even ourselves, who don't want to do what God wants them to do, and God the Spirit convicts us.

[5 : 38] And then the third battle of the flesh is the battle of doing something in vain. Psalm 127 says the builder can go out to work, and God's not in his work, and he just wastes his time.

There he goes building beautiful, beautiful things, and it comes to nothing because it's a work of the flesh. It's a vanity, God says. The builder labors in vain if God is not in it.

And that there has to be recognized because in the church, there's nothing better than to keep a church busy with that type of work. Okay, everyone's busy.

Everyone's tired. And everyone's tired of being so busy doing all those things, and yet you have to measure is how much of that work is vain work, work of the flesh, and how much of it is actually in spirit and in truth.

Now, they're the type of things that you have to consider when you consider the nature of the battle. So, straightforward, it's not as simple as you might first think. It is true that we don't wrestle against flesh and blood as we fight, but it is also equally true that we do wrestle against the flesh and how the flesh wants to do things.

[6 : 56] And the flesh often wants to do things the way that God doesn't want them done. Okay, the flesh desires in ways that God doesn't desire.

And so, we have two battles on our hand, and if we fight the wrong battle, we lose both. Okay, if we fight the wrong battle, we lose both.

And so, I want us to understand the nature of the battle, and then I want us to understand which one to fight. Okay, the nature of the battle, and then which one to fight. And the reason I'm saying this, the reason I'm saying this, is because this will keep you well spiritually.

This will protect your tomorrow. But it will protect your tomorrow in the same way you will go out and perhaps on your way to work, or wherever it is that you will go, obey the traffic lights.

Okay? It's at your peril, whether or not what you do with traffic lights. So, I want you to understand what I'm saying here as red, amber, and green.

[8 : 00] Okay? If you're able to pay attention to that, if you're able to understand how to move and what to do and when, depending on whatever order those lights are coming at you, then this is surely worth more of your attention, bearing in mind that this here is also going to stop a car crash, the car crash of your life.

Okay? This is what this will prevent. And so, I have your best interests in heart, but it comes with, I can't live your life for you in the same way you can't live my life for me.

Okay? We're all experts when it comes to somebody else's life, but when it comes to God's word, okay, this is what I'd like us to pay attention to. So, here we go.

First of all, let's remember the purpose of God in Christ Jesus. We are not to forget that when God sent his son into the world, it was to destroy the works of the devil, 1 John 3, 8.

Okay? Jesus came into this world to pick a fight. And not only did he pick the fight, he won it. He destroyed the works of the devil completely.

[9 : 14] He just came, and what the devil destroyed, God sent his son as promised, Genesis 3, 15, and he sent his son into the world and crushed Satan.

Crushed him under his feet. Destroyed the works of the devil completely, just as God promised. And God also promised, and fulfilled in 2 Corinthians 5, that God would make peace with us as Jesus picked that fight.

As Jesus came in and won that for us, and destroyed the works of the devil, and died on the cross for us, he made peace with us. God made peace with us through giving his son into the world in that way, for those reasons.

Jesus won. Jesus came and he won. But when Jesus came and won, he made us a new creation. And this is the part that I don't want you to forget.

You are a new creation or you're not. You're not somewhere in between. You're either a new creation in Christ Jesus. That doesn't mean that you're complete.

[10 : 23] It doesn't mean that you're perfect. But it does mean that you're new in the sense that newness will come out of your life for the rest of your life until that time when you stand before God himself.

Or you're not yet a new creation. And if not, then you are required, you are commanded to repent and believe so that God would be, God is being merciful to you, rather, in giving you the opportunity to repent and believe, to turn to him and to turn from your sin.

Now, this here is naturally going to focus on those who are new creations. And so I want to give you an illustration of just how important this might be. And the picture is one that you're familiar with back in the Old Testament.

You'll remember how God spectacularly, amazingly, brought his people out from under the oppression of Egypt. And he did that with plagues.

He did that with miracles. He did that with the crossing of the Red Sea. He did that through Moses. He did that with a number of things that if we were there, we would surely be amazed. And we think that if we only had something like that happen to us, then perhaps our faith would be a whole lot stronger.

[11 : 39] Well, I don't think so. And the reason I don't think so is because when you actually look at the people of God brought out of Egypt under all of those conditions and experienced all of those blessings, not long after they're out and in the wilderness, they turn to Aaron, taking off their jewelry and their earrings and saying, can you make a God for us?

And Aaron, because he doesn't know what to do with an impatient people, this is something we'll look at in the future. Because he doesn't know what to do with impatient people, and of course, a people who are still caught up in their ways, he makes the golden calf.

And then, and then, this is a clear breaking of the second commandment. They worship God through the golden calf. It's not that they're worshipping the golden calf. They understand the difference between a metal image in the same way we do.

Okay. You know, the man in Isaiah who chops down the tree and says to the tree, deliver me. He understands that a tree can't do that. But what he, that the sin being committed is the second commandment.

He is trying to worship God through a created image on earth. Okay. He's made for himself a graven image. The golden calf is a graven image. They're dedicating what they are to God, but they're doing it through a golden calf, thus breaking the second commandment.

[13 : 04] God, you know, that's a clear sin. Well, what do we notice then? Well, what we notice is this, is that though the people are out of Egypt, Egypt is not out of the people.

Okay. The people are out of Egypt, but Egypt is not out of the people. This means they're still operating on their own pre-exodus mindset.

They're still caught up in idolatry. What we're to recognize is that the battle that Aaron was facing and the battle that the people themselves were facing was not with where they were now out in the wilderness, waiting for Moses, waiting to enter into the promised land.

But the battle that they were actually facing was that they were unable to deal with their own desires. They're unable to make war and fight their desires that wanted to do the very things that God did not want them to do.

So this is their focus also, the focus on the flesh. When Paul tells these believers in verse 10 to be strong in the Lord, he's drawing attention between them and God.

[14 : 20] He's basically asking these Christian believers to flex their muscles and then look at God as God flexes his. Okay. And you work out who's the strongest.

You work out where you should find your strength from. And he says, verse 18, that the way to get to that strength is simply to come to God in prayer.

Okay. Come to God in prayer. So they're to draw the conclusion between their weakness and God's strength, which would then draw them to God in prayer so that they would then rely on God's strength, that they would rely on the strength of the Lord, that they would be strong in the Lord.

Now, Augustine put it this way, that when a Christian looks at themselves, they should be incredibly self-distrustful. That when a Christian looks at themselves, they should be incredibly self-suspicious.

And the reason they should be self-suspicious and self-distrustful is because when they look at God, they realize that God is holy. They realize that God is good. God is pure. God is perfect.

[15 : 31] God is just. God is strong. God does not sin. Okay. And therefore, having looked at God, it should make perfect sense then not to trust yourself because you are none of them.

Okay. You should be self-suspicious concerning your own loyalty. You should be suspicious of your own ability to trust God without him.

You should be incredibly suspicious about your own love for God. And the reason you should be suspicious is because the flesh that you're still in you is able to make you wage war against the spirit, is able to do it your way.

And so if you think, well, I can trust God and I can trust me, okay, the battle's over. You've already lost because you're not, having not come to a proper evaluation of yourself, that is, I am weak and I need God.

You don't see yourself as any different, though you've not mentally formulated this. And so you don't go to God and pray. You don't rely on him. You don't trust him. There's just none of that.

- [16 : 42] You think perhaps it just happens automatically, but it doesn't happen at all. And the reason it doesn't happen at all is not because you don't know these things to be true about God, is actually you don't know who you are.

And that's what Paul is getting at. It's not that you don't know who God is. It's rather the case that you don't know who you are. You think that when you rely on your own strengths rather than God's, that you are as trustworthy as God, and you're not.

Strength, but you're not. Now, that makes perfect sense now that it's been said.

But it's something easily forgotten. And the reason it's easily forgotten is because the flesh is able to convince us that we're really not that weak.

We're really not that distrustful. No, my will is a lot stronger than that. I can do a lot more for God before I need to rely on him to do a lot more.

- [17 : 47] And that's just not the case. And what happens is you go down this track for long enough, and certain things start turning up, and it's too late to turn the clock back, right?

God can restore the years of the locus of Eden, but things have already set in, right? Things have already set in. So, the nature of the battle is this, that we need to recognize our need for God's strength in the battle.

We need to be ready to stand firm with God, in God, in the battle that we face, on God's side, facing the same way, heading in the same direction.

But too often, as Galatians 5 points out, we're in a battle all right, but we're not fighting with God in the sense that we're on the same side, going in the same direction.

We're fighting with God. God is calling us to live a holy life. He's calling us to live out the fruit of the Spirit. And there we are, not operating on the basis of faith, not operating on the basis of trust, and all of our desires and will is resisting the work of the Spirit.

- [18 : 57] We're in a battle all right, but it's the wrong one. We leave ourselves completely weakened to the spiritual powers of darkness. We leave ourselves completely incapable of fighting any other battle because we're fighting the wrong one over here.

We're losing this battle over here because we're fighting the wrong one down here. And that's what, when you take Ephesians 6 and Galatians 5, that is what we begin to notice.

We're unable to stand firm in the Lord because we are fighting the flesh over here.

And that there is the reason why we lose the battles that we do. So hopefully you see the problem. You see that we're unable to wage war against the spiritual powers of darkness because too many of us think that we're in that battle, right, when we're actually in this battle.

Too many of us think that we're in the Ephesians 6 battle when we're actually in the Galatians 5 battle, right? I'm up against it. Well, in part, you are up against it because the spiritual powers do operate through the flesh.

- [20 : 14] But resisting the spirit is the wrong battle. Not operating on the basis of faith and the power of the spirit is resisting the wrong person.

We ought to be resisting the devil and he will flee rather than resisting the spirit. And so this is perhaps, maybe even very likely, why so many Christians struggle fulfilling the purposes of God on earth.

They're busy, all right, but they're busy doing the wrong thing. They're up against the spiritual forces of evil, but they pay no attention to that because they're waging war against the spirit of God.

They're simply fighting the wrong battle. So we're called to be strong in the Lord and keep in step with the spirit. But here we are doing something entirely different.

We are not wanting to keep in step with the spirit. And there's the battle. We lose the battle over here because we're fighting the wrong battle over there.

[21 : 18] And that's how it works. So the nature of the battle then, in terms of the spiritual battle itself. When we recognize that the battle is actually not with God, but actually with our flesh and actually with the world and the flesh, then suddenly we become woke up to the idea of what we need and when we need it.

There are some things that we need to stop and there are some things that need to begin. Now, Paul makes this kind of argument over and over again because he is fully aware in his day, as I'm sure many of us are aware in our day, that if something doesn't exist here, we go somewhere else for it.

Okay? Now, we have the luxury of having, you know, a good, what, four major supermarket chains, you know, whatever they're, whatever you want to call them. And we know that if we cannot get this item here, then we've at least got, depending on how far they are away, well, I could probably get it in that shop or the other one.

We can get it somewhere else. Right? Now, when it comes to spiritual things, what we have is Paul is saying, here it is. You have to go create it though.

And we think, well, if it doesn't exist, we have to go to the world and get it. An example would be this. In Galatians 6.4, Paul has already said the need for families to operate on what's known as the padea of the Lord, this cultural Christian formation.

[22 : 56] It starts with children. It goes all the way up through the adults, as you would expect, because it has to start with children because they have to be educated. The parents should already be there.

Paul does the same thing over in Corinthians where he has to tell them what a Christian marriage looks like because they're all married and none of them are living a Christian marriage.

So they have to be educated. Now, when Paul says to the fathers, you need to bring your children up on the padea of the Lord, which means this Christian cultural formation. Every father that he, who heard that would have looked at each other and go, well, it doesn't exist.

There isn't one. And Paul goes, I know. Which means that if there isn't one, you're obligated to build one.

Yet what happens is one isn't built. You just use the world's version of it. And that's what's happening here.

[23 : 56] That when it comes to the type of things that you need and they're not available, instead of creating them, instead of coming together as a church ought to and praying and encouraging one another in these ways, we find other ways to fight the battles of the flesh.

And one of the ways to do it is simply to calm it down by perhaps a spending spree or about, you know, these simple things which are not necessarily sinful, but they never deal with the issue at its core.

The church's most basic enemy, okay, the church's most basic enemy is the kingdom of darkness. And we've forgotten that. That the basic enemy against the life of this church is the kingdom of darkness.

And yet the church is too busy fighting the battle of resisting the spirit. We're losing the battle in the world because the church has got so much infighting with God.

And things are tearing themselves apart in here, right, without the cultural formation and impact that we ought to be having out there. And the answer is really simple as to why it's happening.

[25 : 11] It's happening because we're fighting the wrong battle. So I want you to notice a careful observation, but it's one that is self-evident, hopefully.

Paul calls the church here to pray, verse 18. And therefore, he calls the church to pray because he recognizes that the battle is out there, not in here.

And what this means is, is that the battle is not getting the church to pray, okay? The battle is the world, and therefore the church should pray.

But too often, the battle is getting the church to pray, okay? We're having to fight for all the wrong things.

We're having a fight to keep prayer meetings going. We're having a fight to keep Bible studies going. We're having a fight for these things that should automatically be there in order to wage war against the, in order to wage battle, battles against the world, the flesh and the devil.

[26 : 14] And yet, we're not doing it. And the reason we're unable to do that there is because we're trying to fight the battle just to have a prayer meeting or to get people to pray for these things in the first place.

That's why we're losing. That's why we lose. We, we don't see the advancement that we ought to see with the church because the church is caught up in the wrong battle.

This is what Raymond Zorn, which is a great name, put it this way. He wrote a fantastic book, by the way, called Christ Triumphant. You can borrow my copy if, if you want.

And, and he explains it this way. He says, the church is paralyzed by deception, where the works of the flesh are not kept under face control by the power of the spirit.

I'll read it again. He says, the church is paralyzed by deception. In other words, we are so convinced that we're in a battle that we never stopped and asked ourselves, what are we actually battling?

[27 : 22] We're battling a right. It just happens to be the wrong one. It happens. And that's his point. We're paralyzed in the world by the fact that we're not operating under faith or the power of the spirit.

So, here's the exhortation as we wrap it up. Disciples are to make disciples. Disciples are to go out into the world and teach everything that Jesus taught.

That's not simply about believing what Jesus taught, but it's simply about, it is rather more about understanding what Jesus taught means.

The church is paralyzed by its mission in the world simply because the flesh is causing so much havoc in the church. The flesh is not kept under face control or by the power of the spirit.

We're running around in the kingdom of darkness and then complaining that we're busy. I can't do anymore. Well, I'm not surprised you can't do anymore. I'd be tired as well if I was running around.

[28 : 29] This is the emphasis placed here. Nobody's arguing. Nobody's arguing that people aren't tired. Nobody's arguing that people aren't busy. But there's a more basic question that needs to be asked.

And that is, what are you so busy with? What are you so tired from? And that's the question that Paul is sort of getting at here when he's calling this church to be strong in the Lord, right?

Why do you have to tell a church to be strong in the Lord? Well, because they're not being, okay? Jesus tells us the things to do that we, by nature, don't want to do.

The reason we have to be told these things is because, by nature, we don't want to do these things. That's how the Word of God works. Notice, then, the distinction. That while our battles are spiritual, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, and not against flesh and blood, at the same time, we are to wage war against the flesh by the power of the Spirit.

Okay? We are to do that. We are to recognize the nature of the battle is a spiritual one. And therefore, we have to realize that if it's a spiritual battle, we need spiritual weapons.

[29 : 47] And the Word of God and prayer are the weapons of our warfare. That's what we go to war with. We go to it with the Word of God. We go to it with prayer to God.

We are unable to fight the right battle effectively without the right armor, without the right weapons. But God has provided all of these.

If only we will avail ourselves of them. But we don't, because too often we're fighting the wrong battle. The other thing here, which has already been said, but something worth remembering, is that trusting God should make far more sense to you than trusting yourself.

It should be obvious to trust God more than trust yourself. It should be obvious to put your strength in the Lord rather than your strength in yourself.

Your nature, my nature, is not more trustworthy than God's. It's a simple deduction. We're able to work that out. And yet, too often, that doesn't lead, as it should, to trusting the Lord.

[30 : 50] God wants you. The basis of all wisdom, Calvin once said, is not only about knowing God, but about knowing yourself. It's about knowing yourself.

I'm not denying that you're denying anything about God. I'm simply raising the question that do you know yourself well enough? That leads you to trust in the Lord. So, here's the conclusion.

The reason why many in the church, even in this church, experience the peace that they do, is not because things are necessarily peaceful. I want to say that again.

The reason why many people in the church, in this church or any church, experience the peace that they do, is not necessarily because things are peaceful.

But it is because that those who enjoy that peace think that that is the reason. Okay? I'm at peace because things must be peaceful. That's not the reason. Okay?

[31 : 49] It's always the reason of those back home forgetting about those on the front line fighting the battles. The reason why you have the peace that you do is not because it's necessarily peaceful, but because others are fighting for you.

You get to enjoy the peace back there because you've got others out there waging war in this particular way. And that's what we need to remember.

Okay? And those who understand this from this point of view understand that it's not easy. Understand that it needs to be fought. And so, the peace that we enjoy, the spiritual peace that we enjoy, and the spiritual protection that we enjoy come through this type of battle.

It comes through relying on God and through trusting God entirely. Christians are those, as Paul says, are the aroma of Christ in the world.

They are the ones who are to influence the world. They are not the ones to be influenced by the world. They are the ones to be able to defeat and win these battles rather than lose to them.

[32 : 57] But often, the story or the apparent story, the apparent observation, is always the other way round. We are called to be devoted to God and not to be devoted to anything else.

We are called not to become impatient with God and then come up with our own way of how to do worship, like God's people brought out of Egypt. We are to keep everything that we do under the operation of faith by the power of the Spirit.

Because we have three main issues at hand. They are, firstly, that we wrestle against spiritual powers. Two, that we wrestle against the flesh. And three, that much of our work done in the flesh could actually be vain work.

That is a battle that needs to be fought and won. So, notice then how Paul finishes verse 19 and 20. He says, Paul is calling on God for the strength he needs and asking us to pray, or the church here to pray for him, that he would be given what he needs to do what God wants him to do.

So, the call is simple. Go home. Put your shoes on. Tie your laces. And keep in step with the Spirit. Okay? Put your shoes on. Tie your laces.

[34 : 27] And keep in step with the Spirit. Amen. Amen.