



Sermon – June 7, 2020
Phillip Bethancourt

Verses Covered This Week

Ephesians 6:12 - 13

Isaiah 59:16 – 17, 20

And as you grab your seat, let's grab our Bibles and turn to the book of Ephesians, chapter 6. Let me welcome you back. We were hoping to see this many people between two services. How cool is it that we have this many gathered here together in one? We are so overjoyed to see the work of the Lord being here. Aren't you excited to be back? And here's the thing. You might have been gone for the last 13 weeks, but Jesus never left this church. And He's still at work through His word. And I want to say a special word of welcome to our children that are here. If you're a child in the room, will you just raise your hand for a minute? I know I've got my four boys here and we're glad to have you especially if this is one of your first times in big church. If you happen to make some noise, parents don't worry about it. I'll just think they're amening whatever I have to say. And if you're a first time guest, we're glad you're here. Welcome home. We want to invite you to be a part of this church as we turn our attention to Ephesians 6 and chapter, verse 12. If you'll follow along with me. Here's what it says.

¹²For 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. ¹³Therefore 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.

Now we're living in a moment of national tension in our country. We have the instability of Coronavirus that's already gripped us. But in the past two weeks, we've seen racial tension emerge. We've seen highlights on the news channels. We've heard stories of challenges that cities around our country have faced. And it's emerged after the death of George Floyd. And as we watch this tension play out, regardless of where you're coming from on this issue, we can all affirm several things. One is that we have throughout our history seen specific instances of violence that have affected people of color like what happened with George Floyd that are just reprehensible. And we also know that we live in a country that has a difficult history when it comes to racial tension with slavery as a part of our founding story and decades of segregation and a consistent pattern of mistreatment. But at the same time, we know that law enforcement officers in this country make a huge difference. And we're grateful for the many of them,

including many in this church, who serve consistently. And the poor action of some don't reflect the many good things of all. But in the midst of all that we also know that there are helpful ways to advance a conversation when it comes to racial unity in America and unhelpful ways. We've seen peaceful protests turn into violence and looting. And we know there's no place for that. But I raise this this morning because regardless of where you stand, regardless of how you see an issue as tense and as fraught as racial division, what Paul is showing us here this morning is that there is a conflict behind the conflict. There is a spiritual tension behind the tensions that we see playing out in our world. Whether that's on the front of racial division or in any other area of our lives. And if we want to look at what it requires of us to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel as Christians then we need to fix our eyes on the battlefield before us. And that's what Paul is helping us through here in verses 12 and 13 as we move through this second week studying the full armor of God. We saw last week that the reason we need to take up the full armor of God is because there is a dangerous plan to destroy our lives.

And what we're going to notice this morning is as we dive into verses 12 and 13, we're going to see two additional reasons why we must put on Christ who is the full armor of God. And if you'll look back at the text, you're going to notice the first one there in verse 12 where we see Paul telling us that we need to stand firm against a dangerous enemy. See what it says?

¹²For 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.

He speaks there of a dangerous enemy that we face as Christians; these spiritual forces that are against us. And what he's showing us is we're fighting a different battle. You see, if you look back in the Old Testament, the people of God fought the battles of God against flesh and blood. That's what Israel did. From the very beginning in the garden, God gives a promise to His people that one day He will raise up an offspring of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent. And the entire story of the Old Testament, from Genesis all the way through the prophets, is showing us how God is being faithful to keep His promise. And one of the ways that He does that is He fights for His people and their faithful obedience. And when they are unfaithful, He fights against His people in their sinful rebellion. Paul knows that the church at Ephesus would understand this dynamic, but he is showing the way that in the coming of Christ, Jesus changes everything. Now our battle is no longer physical, but spiritual. It is against the forces of evil. But I want you to notice how this passage begins. He starts off by using the word we. He doesn't say, "I wrestle, not against flesh and blood." He says, "We wrestle, not against flesh and blood." Why is that? It's because Paul wants us to understand that the battle that we fight is not meant to be faced alone. That instead, we are to come together as a church to be as one, that our warfare is corporate before it is individual. That's the premise that Paul is giving there. And he speaks there of wrestling. This will be a term that will be used both in a wrestling match like we're familiar with today; they would have those in ancient times. But it was also a term for hand to hand combat; that close encounter. So right now during the Coronavirus shutdown I've been working my boys through the Star Wars films. I've just had to apologize for to them for suffering through the Phantom Menace. They understand what good movies and bad movies are now, but the thing that they look forward to most every time we watch one of those are the battles with the light sabers. That close combat, that intense and direct engagement between the forces good versus the forces of evil. That's a sense of the picture that Paul is

giving us here in the text when he says, “We wrestle. We battle.” This is not distant drone strikes. This is close hand to hand combat in which we are directly engaged. And he says, it’s not against flesh and blood. What does he mean by that? What does he have in mind?

He is showing us the way that in Christ God has changed the nature of our battle. Whereas some like to say it, we are no longer fighting against flesh and blood before flesh and blood. That we are seeking to join with Christ in the rescue of captives from the domain of darkness so that we might see them transferred into the kingdom of light. And that raises a danger for us this morning that we have to wonder, are there times in which we’re fighting the wrong battles? So often we see people that disagree with us and we can be prone to see them as enemies who must be defeated rather than seeing them as opponents. We see them as predators rather than prey of the serpent of old who is seeking to lead them astray. Paul is calling us to the frontlines of the battle as we wage war against them. But look back at the text. Because on the second half of verse 12, he says, “OK, if it’s not against flesh and blood, then who are we battling?” And we’re going to see him describe these spiritual forces that we wage war against right there. Do you see how he talks about it? He speaks of them as rulers, as authorities. This is in the plural form. There are many of these spiritual beings that wage war against us. He talks about it right after that as cosmic powers over this present darkness. In the original language, that idea of cosmic powers is that of world rulers. Those that want to dominate everything. And that shouldn’t surprise us when we know the captain of these demonic forces, satan himself, is referred throughout the New Testament in ways like being the ruler of this world, or the prince of the power of the air, or the god of this age. These cosmic forces over this present darkness. But he also describes them with this umbrella term that they are spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. So who are these spiritual forces? What are these demons that he refers to that he says are still active today? Well he’s talking there about angelic beings who with the devil, fell and rejected and rebelled against God’s kingdom. They are personal spiritual forces of evil who are seeking to carry out and advance the kingdom of darkness in the world around us by using people, structures, and institutions. And we see the ravaging of these demonic expressions all throughout our culture in the travesty of abortion, in the heartache of abuse, in the scourge of racism, in slavery and trafficking. We can see examples of their effects everywhere around us. But if we’re being honest, sometimes we feel those effects deepest in our own hearts or in our own families. Because we know what it’s like to be broken by temptation. We know what it’s like to live in a broken home. We know what it’s like to be surrounded by broken people. Paul is showing us here that this isn’t just bad luck. It’s not just, “Well sometimes things happen.” He’s showing us that there are demonic forces behind this that are seeking to bring them about. And if we are not on guard against this dangerous enemy, how are we going to stand? That’s what he’s confronting us with today.

I remember when I was in school here at Texas A&M. I had a roommate with me and we decided to go out and play the golf course on campus. And being college students who didn’t care much about appropriate attire at the golf course, my roommate showed up wearing flip flop sandals. I don’t recommend that. It doesn’t really help your game. But I remember we teed off on one of the holes and we were coming up on our next shot, the one approaching the green. I was way off on the right, he was way off on the left, and I noticed him get in position to hit his shot, and right before he hit it, I saw him reach in his pocket and grab his phone. He got a phone call. So he was just standing there and he was taking the call, again another probably not appropriate thing to do on the golf course. And then when he finished that up a few seconds

later, he stayed in the same position, got back down, hit that shot, and the next thing I know, I wasn't paying a whole lot of attention to him. But I see him jumping wildly. And he's making tons and tons of noise. And I thought, "He must have just hit the perfect shot." But I look up and I see his ball is nowhere near the pin. Well come to find out, he wasn't making all that commotion because he had hit the perfect shot. He made all that commotion because he was standing in an ant bed. And while he was there in his flip flops on the phone and about to hit his shot, those fire ants were climbing right up his legs. And the way they work is they don't begin to bite until they feel movement or vibration. And then they all swarm at one time. And so he's running around trying to get them off there. And he didn't see this enemy coming. He didn't know the threat it would provide against him. And as a result of that, he was not properly equipped for the moment that he was in. And that's what Paul's warning us about this morning. Are we properly equipped to face the enemy that we encounter every day? That's the picture that we have here. And it's not just a picture Paul was giving us in Ephesians. It's a model that Jesus shows for us throughout the New Testament. Don't you remember the way that He waged war against the demonic forces? He cast out demons. He rebuked them. He cast them out of people. There is this constant interchange between Him and others that didn't just stop there. It was throughout the early church. In fact, if you were to go back and look at Acts 19. What you would find is that there was a demonic experience that Paul was involved in when it came to the church at Ephesus. So here was the situation. You had these Jewish itinerant exorcists who saw Paul and other apostles casting out demons by this name Jesus. So they said, "Hey! We want to get in on that." So they start trying to rebuke evil spirits. And they attempt it one time and the spirit replies back to them and says, "Jesus I know. Paul I know. But who are you?" And the man who's possessed by the evil spirit attacks these seven Jewish exorcists and beats them to such a pulp the text tells us that they fled out of there naked. And as a result of that, people began to be awakened to the power of the gospel. And the text tells of the way that people began to bring their magic books and they burned them, they gave up their past ways. This issue of demonic forces and spiritual powers wasn't just an abstract idea for the church at Ephesus; they had encountered it firsthand. Which is part of what makes it so hard for us today, isn't it? We don't see demonic forces working in such overt and clear ways. And yet what we know is that that's not because we've subdued them. That's not because they're no longer active. But it's because in western culture, they've learned that it's a lot more effective to be subtle than overt. That's one of the reasons I particularly love a book by C. S. Lewis called the Screwtape Letters. If you've never heard of it, it's a senior demon writing to a junior demon given him instructions on how to lead Christians astray and how to prevent people from coming to faith. And part of what this demon talks about is how effective it can be to lull people into complacency by not helping them to realize that you're actually there and you are engaged with them in the spiritual battle. Paul is sounding a warning for us today. We have a dangerous enemy in our midst. And we must be ready to stand in the midst of the battle. And that raises a question for each of us as we walk back in here for the first time this morning in 13 weeks. Maybe some of you are coming back and you are soaring high. Your spiritual life is fervent. You feel great about where things are. You are so glad to be here. But if we're being honest, I imagine there are others of you that are limping in here. You're broken. You're discouraged. You've seen these demonic forces in your own life, perhaps in ways that you're embarrassed by. Maybe even some of you today watching online just couldn't bring yourself to be here because you didn't think you were ready to be back in church because of the ways that you've fallen short of God's design for your life over this time. What Paul is reminding us of here is that we have an enemy that is waging war against us, but we have a King who is much greater than that. Who will stand on our behalf

and fight our battles for us against this dangerous enemy. But I want you to look back at this passage and see Paul doesn't just tell us to stand firm because we face a dangerous enemy. Look a second with me in verse 13. He calls us to stand firm during a dangerous time. Do you see it back there in verse 13? He says this:

¹³Therefore 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.

So if we remember last week, verse 10, he told us to put on the armor of God. Now he tells us to take up the armor of God. Literally to pick it up. To place it on. And as we recall from last week, to put on the armor of God is to put on Christ who is the armor of God. And if you've got your Bible with you, hold a spot here in Ephesians 6, but let's turn back to Isaiah chapter 59. Because I want you to see something there in the text. What you're going to find is that Paul is going to show us where this imagery comes from. He's not just picking this up from the Roman soldiers that he likely saw right outside his prison cell in the moment. There is specific scriptural imagery that he is picking up on from Isaiah 59. Look down with me at verses 16 and 17. Isaiah's writing here and speaking of the way that God is about to bring judgment on His people for their sinful rebellion. And look at how he describes God in verses 16 and 17. He says this:

¹⁶He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and righteousness upheld him. ¹⁷He put on the righteousness as a breastplate,

Sound familiar?

And a helmet of salvation on his head;

You recognize that one?

He put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.

Now look down at verse 20 with me. He says this:

²⁰“And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression,” declares the Lord.

There's this picture of God as a divine warrior who is there in this case not to fight for His people and their faithful obedience, but to fight against them in their sinful rebellion. To bring about judgment. And it speaks of this one who has a breastplate of righteousness, who has a helmet of salvation. And this is the precise imagery that Paul is injecting into Ephesians. But notice what happens here. Don't miss this. Isaiah speaks about God being the one that bears the armor in the battle. But when we come to Ephesians, we see that it is us as the church who are the ones that are called to bear the armor and take up the battle. How does that work? It's because we have now been united to Christ by faith. We are connected to Him. We have put off the old self and put on the new self. We have rejected old ways. We have put on Christ who is the armor of God and we are called to wage war because we know it is a dangerous time. One of my other college roommates, when I was here at A&M, when he graduated from school he

became an officer in the army. Went through Army Ranger training and he was deployed on several occasions in Afghanistan. And as I would talk to him when he got back, he said, "It's totally different when you're there on location. Even when you're on base, you always have to be vigilant." He told me about this one place that he was stationed in the Taka Valley. He said, "There, there was consistently a presence of enemies who had a perfect spot up on a hill above them that if they could make it to that spot, would sometimes be fortunate enough to launch a mortar shell in and to cause us harm." And so even when you're on base, even when you're behind protective walls, there's always this vigilance. There's always this looking out for the enemy because you know it is a dangerous time. You are behind enemy lines. And what Paul was showing us here this morning, is we are in the same position. We are behind enemy lines. We are on a rescue mission to claim captives to sin and to set them free from the deception of these demonic forces. That's what Paul is laying out for us. And so if that's true, what does that mean for the way that we live? That means there must be a persistent vigilance. That as he says there, we must withstand, to stand against, to oppose, to resist. As you see that in verse 13 when he says withstand, that's the same word that's used in 1 Peter 5:9 or James 4:7 when the writers say things like "resist the devil and he will flee from you." We must withstand in the battle. And as he finishes there he says, having done all to stand firm. There is this commitment, this unwavering, relentless effort that happens. Having done all there's nothing left to do on the battlefield because we have put it all out there. We've been all in from the beginning and when that's true, by the power of the Spirit, that is what enables us to stand. Perhaps we can think about this through the lens of what we've been going through in the last few weeks with Coronavirus. I remember one of the first Sundays here when we started welcoming some of our pilot groups back. Somebody came up to me after the service and they said, "Pastor, I really want to meet you and introduce myself and I'm a hugger. I know we're not supposed to do that but will you at least let me shake your hand? I've got a bottle of Purell right here. And as soon as I shake your hand, we'll both get some Purell and clean ourselves off. And so we did. And it was just a reminder, we're living in such a strange time, right? Things are different right now. We have to live in a different way because there's an invisible enemy around us that we have to change the way that we live and carry ourselves in order to remain vigilant against it.

Well how much more so is that the case when it comes to the gospel? And the way that Paul is calling us here to remember this is a dangerous time. He says there it is the evil day. We know that in this moment we are living in two ages at the same time. That we live in this evil day because even though Christ came to this earth as God's only Son and lived a perfect life and He went to the cross and died the death of a rebel sinner on our behalf, and he was raised from the grave striking the death blow against satan and sin. Even though that's true, we do not yet see all things under his feet. The serpent is still active. The lion still seeks people to devour. And we are waiting for that day when Christ shall return and to make all things new and to restore all things to be right yet again. And that's what Paul is reminding us here. In this time between the times, we must recognize that we live in a dangerous period. We are behind enemy lines and we must always press on in the faith. But I don't know about you. When I read Paul saying, leave it all out there on the field and do everything you can to stand, that sounds exhausting. How do we persevere? How do we press on in the fight? If we're doing it in our own strength, if we're seeking to do it by our own willpower and our discipline, we will never be able to withstand the enemy. We will never be able to stand firm in the midst of the battle. What we have to recognize is that the same one who gives us the armor is the same one who gives us the Spirit. And it's by the power of that Spirit that we are able to stand firm. We can stand in the battle

because Christ stood for us on the cross. We can stand in the midst of warfare because we follow a King who is seated on a heavenly throne. I was reminded this week that this weekend is the 76th anniversary of D-Day in World War II. We know that was the moment of decisive victory even though it wasn't fully realized until V-Day months later. That was when the deathblow was struck against the enemy. And as I was thinking about that, I remembered that season of time. If you were living in London or you were living in England, there was a stretch of time where the Germans blitzed the English people with night after night of bombing raids. For 57 straight days, every night, when the darkness arrived, unseen forces advanced who were sent out by a tyrannical leader who was seeking to bring about world domination through secret tactics against a vulnerable enemy. Night after night it would come. The assault would happen. Every day they would wake up and see more and more rubble, more and more carnage around them. But the people stood firm. They resisted the attacks of this invisible enemy. And after that season passed, they were able to overcome by the strength of their might. And how much more so is that true for us in Christ? That we have a spiritual enemy who wages war against us, who seeks to take advantage of the darkness of this evil day and seeks to oppress us so that he might gain world dominion through secret tactics against vulnerable enemies like you and me. But the power we have is not the strength of a military army, but a risen King. One who enables us to stand firm in the midst of the battle and to continue to fight the good fight of the faith. And so the call of the gospel for us this morning is to stand firm in the midst of the battle because we know we face a dangerous enemy in the midst of a dangerous time.

Let's close in prayer together.

Lord, I don't know the circumstances of those that you have brought here this morning. If they feel wounded in the midst of battle or if they are walking in a season of sustained victory. Wherever they are, Lord, I pray by Your Spirit You would meet them where they are. That You would minister to their hearts, that You would ready us for the warfare that You have called us to that we might keep pressing on in the faith, Lord. Your word tells us that apart from You we can do nothing. And we feel that in this time, even in the midst of the joy of being back together there is still a longing for more. There is still a longing for heaven. And I pray that You meet that longing in each one of our hearts and that You show us Jesus in whose name we pray. Amen.