

I. Intro

A. Glad to see you here – especially since I left a bunch of men at the Men’s Retreat in Grand Geneva – good time.

B. I hope you had a good week. Mine had some good moments.

1. There was a Lakelight event in Indy. So I took some advantage of the trip there to meet with some foundations we are hoping will invest in Lakelight or Renew. And also to see some old friends.

2. Sheri and I had a couple quiet nights – which are always appreciated.

C. So, I say I had a pretty good week, and I hope you did as well. But I know that some of you did not. There is always pain, confusion and frustration in the room. Often some desperation as well.

1. I’ve recently had conversations with people for whom election results have led to family disruption.

2. I spoke with an older couple – which people my age! - trying to figure out how to interact with their adult children, whom they dearly love but think are making some mistakes.

3. I talked with a pastor friend who is discouraged.

4. I heard from a person who is frustrated with his work situation.

D. Life is hard and God can seem distant. Prayers can appear to go unanswered. Our plans are upended. Why do so many things go wrong? Why don’t more things go right?

E. After noting that some of what we think is bad now we will later decide was good. (I heard several of those stories just this week). But some of what happens to us is bad by almost any standard. What is up with that? Why do things go wrong.

1. Among them would be sin. Yours, mine and theirs. We have the generic sense that sin entered the world through one man, and everything suffers because of it. Genesis 3 is on full display. Weeds grow. Communication is confused. People hurt each other. Things spin out of control. Indeed, they never seem to spin into control.

2. So, one of the answers to the question, “Why are things hard?” is, things are broken because of sin. A second right answer – the one we are taking up today – is, things are hard because we are in a battle against spiritual forces of darkness. Evil is real and the devil and his legions are working to make things worse.

F. In most places and at most times, that claim is not unusual. Spiritual warfare is understood to be a thing. The spiritual realm was understood to be real. Indeed, in most parts of the world, the idea that you could consider yourself educated and not understand the spiritual realm was a joke.

1. We seem to be moving back in that direction. I have preached on this passage twice before. Once, 30 years ago when I was a college campus. And once here, 20 years ago here – and when I read over my notes from those I realize I spent a lot more time trying to persuade people that evil was a real thing – not just that bad things happened, but that there were evil agents. Personal evil. Spiritual beings working to our harm.

2. There has been a growing shift. Complicated. Lots of moving parts. But it feels like some have made a shift from just focusing on intelligence, to seeing the need for wisdom (a life that worked based on truth). And that some made an additional shift to realizing that there was not just truth, but spiritual truth and spiritual beings.

3. Of course, many have moved the other way. It's complicated.

G. All of that to say, our focus today is on Ephesian 6 and the advice it contains about how to navigate spiritual warfare – which it describes as a normal thing.

II. This is our last week in Ephesians.

A. In the first few chapters Paul covered: our blessing in Christ; salvation by grace; the unity of the church; the new status of the Gentiles and the work of the Holy Spirit. And then we have that benediction

1. ²⁰Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

B. In the second half of the book we got practical advice about our speech, sexual ethics and a lot about relationships. In light of the great blessings that are ours. In light of the doctrine laid out in the first part of the letter, we are called to be humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

C. And then we get our section on spiritual warfare. The suggestion is that we need to be good in part because we do not want to give our enemy ammunition to use against us.

D. There is more. At the very end we will get a bit of the housekeeping stuff we normally get from Paul. Personal greetings. Please bring me my winter coat. Say hello to X. Thanks Y.

1. When you read Paul's letters you can see how important friends are to him.

2. And we can learn a lot from the names. We don't get a lot of that here. The letter seems to be more of a circular one than to a specific church.

III. Let's look at Ephesians 6:10: **Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.**

A. OK, well, Paul is always saying things like this. Life is hard. Be strong. Grind it out.

1. Jesus's most common greeting to his friends is "fear not." It's encouraging. Paul is more of a football coach. Press On. Try harder.

B. But that is not actually what he is saying here. The gist of Paul's advice is not that we need to work harder at fighting Satan. It is to say, we need to work harder to be close to Christ. And – note this! - we do not get a discourse on Satan.

1. There are some places in the Bible where we get a bit of that: Isaiah and Ezekiel. And Paul will say something about his tactics in 2 Cor; We also have what we can learn from his names (Satan, the devil, our adversary, Beelzebub - which translates Lord of the flies - the accuser, the father of lies)

2. And if we do a systematic study we learn that he's a fallen angel. He was very high and he fell very low. And that he took 1/3 of the angels with him;

3. And we know some other things. Most importantly that while he has power, he is not God's equal but opposite. Not even close. That dualistic understanding is found in some worldviews – like Manichaeism, but not in Christianity.

C. But in Paul's counsel here we do not get a case study on his methods. We don't get a scouting report on his strengths and weaknesses. His background. Paul's counsel is, "be strong in God. Be focused on Him. Be in love with Him."

D. And Peter says the same thing. In I Peter 5:8 we are told that our enemy is prowling around like a lion seeking someone to devour, and we are to flee. Not to stay and take notes. Not to study his tactics. But flee.

E. Driving back from Grand Geneva yesterday afternoon I ended up in a discussion with a friend, who – like me – was shaped by John Stott. I'll never forget I was with John Stott and he was speaking to a group. And after wards he did a Q and A. And it was not uncommon for younger students to try to best him. And someone was saying a lot about this, and John said – and I think it was just very dry humor that few would catch. And maybe not. But he said, "I don't know much about Satan. Perhaps you know more."

IV. **V11: Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.**

A. There is so much here. When I spoke on this 30 years ago and 20 years ago this was multiple weeks. We might have to circle back to this later. (We actually shortened this series because I did that sermon on the election last week).

B. By the way, when I did this here twenty-five years ago. I had Jason – who was like six at the time – come out in battle gear and we talked about each part. And he was not only nervous in front of the group, he really hammed it up. Today I'm less interested in the specific parts than I am in alerting you to the challenges we face.

V. **For our struggle** - The word that is used for struggle - **our struggle is not against flesh and blood** – is not the normal word. It's not combat at a distance, but wrestling on the ground. That suggests it's pretty intense.

VI. **For our struggle is not against rulers, authorities, powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.** Interesting that he doesn't just say "demons." He makes them sound formidable and stealthily insidious.

VII. V13: **Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.** (This suggests that while we should not underestimate him, we should not over estimate him either). **Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith** (a defensive tool), **with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God** (and also offensive).

VIII. I want to push two things here: balance and zeal. I'm not sure I will get this right. They sort of work against each other. I reworked this last night and also this morning. I think I will figure out what I wanted to say as I am driving home.

A. I also want to pray. One of themes from last week was – pray more.

IX. When it comes to spiritual warfare, it is important for you to know that there are two ways to get this wrong – so, you need to pay attention to which mistake you are making and self-correct.

A. Some see Satan under every rock. Some forget all about him.

B. CS Lewis gives us a great quote here. In the introduction to *The Screwtape Letters*, he writes: "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 a magician with the same delight."

C. I think Richard Baxter¹ - the prominent 17th century Puritan pastor and author – is more helpful here. In a book on Melancholy, he in which he suggested that are four possible causes of depression

1. Physical – for which he advocated food or rest;
2. Psychological – which suggests we need love and affirmation;
3. Moral – we feel guilt and need to repent.
4. And only after those three does he go to the demonic. But he does list it as a possibility.

D. This seems to me to be a thoughtful – indeed a sophisticated approach. Some today find Satan under every rock. And others wouldn't suspect the devil was involved unless they saw a person's head spinning around.

X. But I feel a need to say a bit more to you who are still skittish about the idea of personal evil.

- A. I want to underline the thesis statement of this passage: **our struggle is not against flesh and blood.**
- B. This is not to say that we do not face flesh and blood problems – that flesh and blood do not matter. They do. Remember, Paul was imprisoned and stoned. There are real natural evils. Crime. War. Racism. Poverty. Injustice. These are natural problems, but Paul is saying there is more than just natural problems. And that some of our natural problems have a supernatural cause.
- C. We need to realize that we are engaged in a battle that goes beyond nature.
- D. The Modern world – and here I am capitalizing the M. I don't just mean the 21st century. The 21st century West is a mix of people who have a Modern worldview, people who have a Postmodern worldview and people who waffle back and forth between the two.
- E. The point I am trying to make is that starting with the Enlightenment we moved into an age of rationalism and science. And out of that emerged a view that everything has a natural cause and a scientific explanation.
- F. Those thinking this way said that crime, violence, greed, racism, cruelty – all of these things - have natural causes. People are inherently good. And so, if they are acting in ways that are not good, there has to be a natural reason for it. And so, what we need is more time and more science and more education and more money so that we can fix the bad systems. And when we do everything will work.
- G. In, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*, Andrew Delbanco, a very distinguished secular liberal – he's won many academic and literary awards - opens his book:² “A gulf has opened in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources available for coping with it. Never before have images of horror been so widely disseminated and so appalling – from organized death camps to children starving in famines that might have been averted. Rarely does a week go by without newspaper and television accounts of teenagers performing contract killings for a few dollars, women murdered on the street for their purses, young men shot in the head for the keys to their jeep—and these are only the domestic bulletins... The repertoire of evil has never been richer. Yet never have our responses been so weak. We have no language for connecting our inner lives with the horrors that pass before our eyes in the outer world...”
- H. He goes on to note that many feel the need to say that mass murders like Hitler and Stalin had mental disorders – with the suggestion that they are not really culpable for what they did – because we have no belief in evil. And he says we don't like to use the word evil because it implies moral absolutes, so we use medical terminology.
- I. In his book, Delbanco frames all of this by referencing a scene from *Silence of the Lambs*, where Officer Starling – Jodi Foster's character - goes to meet Hannibal Lecter (the Anthony Hopkins character) for 1st time. And while she is there, she asks a guard, “What happened to him to make him so twisted?” And he heard her. And he says, “Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. I happened. You can't reduce me to a set of influences, Officer Starling. You've given up good and evil for behaviorism. You've got everyone in moral dignity pants. Nothing is ever anybody's fault. Look at me. Can you stand to say, I'm evil?”

1. Delbanco says, “the modern West cannot answer the monster’s question.” Again, his point is that since the Enlightenment, all evil has natural causes – scientific, psychological and sociological causes.

J. In contrast, the Bible claims that evil is real. Indeed, it argues that:

1. There are two groups of beings who have free will: people and angels.

2. That some angels fell, and have now come to embrace and embody evil. The Bible’s claim is that while psychological and social factors can fuel the bad that is in our heart, but they don’t fully create it. They don’t explain it.

K. Men and women, we need to realize that we do not simply wrestle against flesh and blood. There is a devil. And we are being naïve not to see this.

1. In his treatment on this passage, Tim Keller argues - and I found it almost comical knowing that he is speaking to those who view themselves as being educated and cultural enlightened. He suggests that they do not believe because

a) They are being too simplistic. (Which is a real jab). Or, worse yet, they are being culturally narrow. He notes that most people in most countries believe in evil, and to note do so is to be a cultural snob.

b) He then asks, if you believe in God (if you believe in a good supernatural being) - why not believe in a bad one? He suggests that their naivety about evil sets them up to fail.

XI. There is more. We need balance and zeal. And we need some education. We need to be aware of his tactics.

A. Paul writes more about this in 2 Corinthians 2, where he encourages us not to be naïve as to the devil’s methods or devices. Between these two passages, I think we can parse out that he moves between three tactics: deception (he is the father of lies), accusation (when our view of God’s love and grace is too low) and temptation (when our view of our powers is too high). Which should drive us to the cross

¹ Thanks to Tim Keller for bringing Baxter’s book to my attention.

² Thanks to Keller a second time for this point.