

## **“Be Strong in the Lord”**

Ephesians 6: 10-20

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From *The Message*, The New Testament in Contemporary Language, Eugene Peterson

**“God is strong, and he wants you strong.** So take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. This is no afternoon athletic contest that we’ll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.

Be prepared. **You’re up against far more than you can handle on your own.** Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it’s all over but the shouting you’ll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You’ll need them throughout your life. **God’s Word is an indispensable weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long.** Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other’s spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.”

We Presbyterians don’t talk much about the Devil. I’ve always been glad about that. I’m glad we spend most of our time talking about God instead of about the Devil.

But we would be remiss if we *never* talked about the one spoken of in the Gospel of John as “a murderer from the beginning, and (as one who) has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” (John 8:44) We would be remiss to *never* speak of the one about whom Paul speaks in Ephesians when he calls believers to put on the whole armor of God to stand up against the Devil’s evil tricks. We would be remiss to *never* talk about the Devil.

The writer C.S. Lewis says: “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 feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. The devils are equally pleased by both errors . . . .” (preface to *The Screwtape Letters*)

A couple of weeks ago, Dan took the boys to Busch Gardens. When they returned home, Cameron said it was a good day, but he was upset that Daddy hadn’t let him buy the light-up Devil’s horns to wear on his head.

If only the Devil were that conspicuous—dressed in red leotards, flashing horns on his head, a pitchfork in hand. “Here I am, ready to tempt you—ready to tell you some lies.” Unfortunately, the Devil is often subtle, always tricky.

C.S. Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters: How a Senior Devil Instructs a Junior Devil in the Art of Temptation* is a series of letters from the Screwtape to Wormwood. Over and over again, the Senior Devil comes up with subtle temptations to cause Christians to

stumble. Screwtape (the Senior Devil), writing to Wormword (the Junior Devil), says: “All extremes except extreme devotion to the Enemy (God) are to be encouraged.” (p.33)

The Apostle Paul says that the Christian life is a battleground. The enemy in this battle uses lies as his weapons of choice. To defend and protect ourselves from the lies we need the whole armor of God. We need the strength that only God can provide. We need truth, righteousness, peace, faith and salvation. We need God’s Word and we need prayer. To deflect the burning arrows of the Evil One, we must be prepared.

Many of you can identify with the military metaphor. A number of you have put on modern day armor and fought modern-day wars. We all know you need good equipment and weaponry. You also need good training. You need discipline.

The military trains its soldiers over and over again. The military trains its soldiers in such a way that the soldiers’ responses are almost second-nature. The rigor of training, the amount of repetition is designed to prepare them to face the enemy. The training and discipline prepares soldiers to face the stressful situations of battle when mind and body are taxed and to still function and perform because the training has helped their response be almost second-nature.

Athletes do the same thing. They practice and repeat drills until the moves are in their minds and in their bodies. Musicians do the same thing as they are learning compositions. My piano teacher in college used to say: “It’s got to be in your fingers.” He meant that I had to do more than memorize the Chopin Waltz in my mind. I had to do more than capture it in my heart. I had to train and train and train my fingers to know that piece of music—for it to be second-nature to my fingers as they moved across the keyboard.

Paul in this passage from Ephesians is saying that the Enemy is for real. The enemy is proactive in shooting the burning arrows of his lies at us. And if we hope to withstand the temptations—blatant and subtle alike—we need to go to spiritual boot camp. We need to develop such spiritual disciplines as regular reading of God’s Word and prayer so that our responses to the lies will be well-rehearsed and deeply ingrained in the core of who we are, indeed that we will actually live counter to the lies as if it were second-nature.

When my husband Dan started out in the Army he was a Field Artillery Officer. I watched him working at home with maps and graph paper, plotting grid coordinates for artillery strikes. I heard him talk about it enough that I knew the basic vocabulary of Field Artillery 101.

We were invited to a picnic with his fellow soldiers and we arrived at the park only to discover that quite a few of the soldiers didn’t know how to find the picnic site where we were to meet. I found this a bit humorous. I commented to one of the guys: “Maybe we should have had some grid coordinates.” To which he replied: “Oh, are you in the Army, too?” I said: “No, I’d probably be the last person you’d want in the Army.” I could talk some of the talk, but I could never walk the talk. I knew a few words, but I was in no way prepared to fight a battle.

Some years ago I was at the hospital with Charlie, the husband of one of my parishioners, just before he was to have surgery. Charlie had a great sense of humor. When his surgeon came in before the surgery he said: “Have you studied up to do this surgery?” “Yes,” she said (playing along), I’ve got the book in the operating room so I

can follow the directions.” “Well, have you read it?” Charlie asked. “Just the stuff in bold print,” she said. “That’s all I really need!”

I think Paul is saying in Ephesians that just knowing the language of faith, just knowing the stuff in bold print, may not be enough in waging the battle with the “father of lies.” I think he’s saying somehow we need to allow the truth to be “in our fingers”—to be so much a part of whom we are that we are prepared for the stress of battle.

Well, you might be saying, what are the lies we need to be ready to combat? Years ago there was a TV advertisement for the *Wall Street Journal*. The commercial introduced twin boys. One from his youth read the *Wall Street Journal*. The other boy read fishing magazines. In the next scene they are grown men. The one who read the *Wall Street Journal* is rich. He has a splendid mansion. He is surrounded by beautiful women. He lives the life of luxury and success. The other brother still lives at home with his parents and spends his days fishing. The clear message of the commercial is that one brother has greater intrinsic value than the other because of what he has accomplished, what possessions he has amassed and the quality of people surrounding him.

Daily, in a variety of ways, you and I are bombarded with the message that our value is based on how we look, what we own, what degrees we have earned, how well our children turn out, what grades we make, what college we get into, how often we go to church, how much money we make, how much money we give, how many activities we can successfully juggle without losing our minds, the number of beautiful people we are surrounded by and much, much more. And that, my friends, is a lie. It is a lie that is shot at us every day. It is the fundamental lie that is the basis for all the other lies and all the other temptations we face.

At the Elkton Church where I served as pastor for more than 10 years, we had a children’s ministry. Through some of the training we went through in preparation for expanding the children’s ministry we got buttons that said: “You are a Child of God and I will treat you that way.” We then made signs that were up everywhere in the church all the time that said the same thing. These signs reminded us of the truth that we are all children of God, not because we have done anything to earn that, but because God has created us in His image and has called us children of God. The signs were helpful to me for there were many times I questioned my value because I felt I had fallen short. I was reminded that *I* was a child of God and that I needed to treat myself that way, too. We are valuable because we are God’s children. Nothing can ever change our value to God—nothing we achieve or don’t achieve, nothing we say or do, nothing at all. And nothing can change the value of God’s other children. Nothing at all.

“Dee” came to our church. She was living at the Adult Care Home two blocks from the church. That first Sunday she walked. After that Alan and his sons picked her up every Sunday they could. A few other church members picked her up, too. “Dee” was around 50. When she was a toddler she had suffered a brain injury that changed her forever. She walked with an unusual gait. She couldn’t sit still in church. She often wandered up close to the pulpit while I preached and stood right in front of me on the step just below. She said some things that were peculiar, but often said things that were really very insightful.

I wish I could tell you everyone was happy that “Dee” was at church. It was really tough for some, although I know everyone tried really hard. Some, I’m sure out of

great awkwardness, suggested that perhaps the church really wasn't the place for "Dee." I will always remember and appreciate one person in an informal meeting saying boldly, "She is a child of God and we should treat her that way. She is as valuable and precious to God as any one of us. In fact, I think she may even be Jesus among us, teaching us something very important."

The church as a whole must battle the lies. We must battle the lie that we exist solely for ourselves and people like us.

Put on the whole armor of God, Paul says. Take the indispensable weapon of God's Word. Pray. The good news is that we have this armor—all of it a gift from God. We have this weapon. We have the Spirit within us to help us pray. We don't have to go looking for all we need.

I am reminded of the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. Each character felt he or she needed something to win their respective battles. The lion needed courage. The tin man needed a heart. The scarecrow needed a brain. Dorothy needed a way home. In the course of their journey and their encounter with the not-so-great Wizard of Oz, they discovered they already had what they thought they needed. They had had it all along. What they needed was discipline. They needed on-the-job training. They needed each other. And they needed reminders so that they could believe the truth about who they really were.

We have what we need. Put on the belt of truth—to remind you of the truth of who you are and who others are as children of God—valuable, precious beyond measure. This truth will set us free.

Put on the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation to remind you that as God's child you are saved and made righteous not by your own works but by God's grace through Jesus Christ.

Put on the Gospel of Peace shoes as you train for the battle and as you combat the lies with Good News and Peace to all who have believed the lies.

Carry the shield of faith—a faith that nothing can separate us from God's love

Carry the sword of the spirit—God's word—for in the bold print and the fine print we learn the truth of who we are and who God is.

Pray. Pray hard and long. May we pray for ourselves. May we pray for one another. May we pray for those who believe the lies.

May we receive the very strength of God, which is offered to us for the battle ahead. May we believe and live the truth. May we call the lies what they are—LIES. May the truth set us free.