

Spiritual Warfare

Ephesians 6:1-24

Key Verse: 6:10

by Kevin Albright

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.”

What is life like? One ridiculous metaphor comes from the movie, Forrest Gump: “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re going to get.” A better metaphor is one that Jacob in Genesis used: life is a pilgrimage (Ge 47:9). In his excellent book, “The Purpose Driven Life,” Pastor Rick Warren gives in chapters 5 and 6 three metaphors for life: life is a test, life is a trust, and life is a temporary assignment. One of the metaphors Paul liked to use in his writings is that life is a battle. Paul calls it “the good fight.” 1 Timothy 6:12a says, “Fight the good fight of the faith.” Again Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 2:3, “Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” Then are Christians supposed to pick up swords and fight non-Christians to the death? No. Paul says our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces of evil. May God help us to be ever aware that life is a spiritual battle. May God help us to be strong in the Lord and to put on the full armor of God.

Paul already introduced proper Christian behavior in the relationship between Christian husbands and wives. With apostolic authority and the wisdom of God, Paul told wives to submit to and respect their husbands. And Paul told husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, sacrificially. Paul was not even married but he was an excellent marriage counselor. Now Paul turns his attention to the proper Christian behavior and attitude that should be practiced between children and parents, and slaves and masters.

First, children and parents. Look at verse 1. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” Paul is speaking to children here. Paul did not ignore children in his letter, thinking they were unimportant. After all, are not children the future leaders of the world? Winston Churchill had a professor who always bowed first thing before his classroom students. The professor said

he did so because one of his students just might become the Prime Minister of Great Britain. He was right.

Even from childhood, there is a spirit of rebellion and anarchy in the human heart. Children often live in the rebellious idea: “No one can tell me what to do!” Of course, a six year old boy who thinks this way is silly, since he needs his parents’ provision, protection and guidance. But as the boy gets bigger and smarter, he begins to think he’s as strong and wise as his parents and doesn’t really need them. He begins to test the limits of law and starts breaking rules set by his parents to see if he can get away with it. The Bible has a word for this: sin. Disobedience is sin. On rare occasions, disobedience is justified. This is for rare exceptions; it is not the rule. The problem is that we can easily encourage a disobedient spirit, as if it is one of our human rights. As a result, children often think it’s cool to challenge authority, to break the law, to sin. Indeed, there is a certain ‘thrill’ or ‘rush’ in disobedience which the Bible calls, “the pleasures of sin.” (Heb 11:25)

Paul says, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” Some health club members have a workout trainer, not a partner, but a trainer. The trainer is trained in the science of body conditioning. If a woman obeys her trainer, she will begin to see positive results in her health. If she disobeys her trainer’s instructions on exercise and diet, she should not expect any improvement. Parents are trained in the science of parenting. Some are better trained than others. But all parents have learned from their own parents. They have learned what to do and what not to do by how their parents raised them. For example, a father who loves his son will not put a bear trap next to his bed, even for training. Parents love their children and don’t want to see harm come to them. A father does his best to direct, guide and discipline his son so the son may be successful and happy. What loving parent gives foolish advice to his child?

But there is a problem: all parents are fallen and do not always give godly advice to their children. So Paul says that children are to obey their parents “in the Lord.” Here, “in the Lord” means “in the sight of God.” Children grow properly when they obey their parents for the glory of God, rather than making many excuses. So when a mother says to her child, “Jimmy, make your bed before you go out to play,” he should not say, “Oh, mom! I’m watching TV. I’ll do it later. Anyway, it’s just going to get messy again tonight!” On the other hand, if parents tell their

children to stop studying the Bible or going to church, the children are not obligated to obey them for that would be against a higher law, namely God's. Peter tells us the proper response to an ungodly command: "We must obey God, rather than men!" (Ac 5:29)

Sometimes obedience can be merely outward, but not inward. A truly obedient spirit comes with an attitude of honor and respect. Look at verse 2. " 'Honor your father and mother'—which is the first commandment with a promise..." Disrespect of parents, teachers and rulers is sin before God. The Bible attests to this. Jesus said, quoting the Old Testament, "Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death." (Mk 7:10; Ex 21:17) Paul doesn't warn here of the consequences of disrespect and disobedience. But he does mention the promised reward of obedience and proper honor: "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." (3)

Now look at verse 4. "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." What does 'exasperate' mean? It means, to irritate or provoke to a high degree, or to annoy extremely. For example, Chicago traffic often exasperates us. Then why do fathers have a tendency to provoke their children? As we know well, fathers, and mothers as well, have high expectations for their children. So, parents can often get in the bad habit of nagging their children, do this and do that, like Pharisees. Sometimes the best thing a parent can do is to set a good example or to walk a child through a new responsibility. This requires great patience. For example, if I ask my son to powerwash the porches, then I must show him how to do it, even though by teaching him how to do it, I'm not accomplishing my aim to have him do it while I can work on something else. But the next time I ask him to do it, he won't need my help, hopefully. Parents must teach their children by example. If they want their children to write Bible testimonies, then parents must show their own struggle and effort to write sincere Bible testimonies. If they want their children to learn to pray with personal faith, then parents must show the good example through their own prayer lives in the morning, at meal times and at bed time. If they want their children to study hard and not waste time watching television, then parents must set the example by reading the Bible and using their time wisely. In this way, parents can bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord. God told Abraham to do this, and his son Isaac turned out quite well as a man of faith.

Second, slaves and masters. Look at verses 5-8, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.” These words don’t seem relevant to us, since slavery was abolished in our nation. Neither should we encourage slavery in any nation. In fact, it was a devout Christian named William Wilberforce who labored most for the abolition of slavery in Great Britain (as depicted in the movie, “Amazing Grace”). Then what do these words for slaves have to do with us in 21st century America? As said previously, the word “obey” is not well-received in our culture, or in practically any culture these days. Thus, this imperative teaches us the wisdom and grace of a humble, obedient spirit. These words apply well today to the employee and boss relationship. Employees must obey their bosses, not just when their eye is on them. Employees must not work hard while their bosses are in the office, and then play computer games when they are out of town. PhD students should not work hard just until their advisor leaves for the day. Paul uses the expressions “just as you would obey Christ,” “doing the will of God from your heart,” “as if you were serving the Lord.” Paul promises “the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does.”

Look at verse 9. “And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.” Masters were to treat their slaves with respect. Masters needed to remember that God is the Master of all. All people in positions of power and authority, such as kings, presidents, fathers, foremen and supervisors must all remember that God is above them and they have been appointed to lead and inspire those under their authority to work and live for the glory of God.

Third, be strong in the Lord. Look at verse 10. “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.” Christians must be strong, not through barbell workouts, but by growing in faith, hope and love in Jesus Christ. Moses’ advice and God’s word to Joshua was one and the same, “Be strong.” (Dt 31:7; Jos 1:6,7,9) Of course, Joshua had to literally fight battles with the Canaanites

to take the land God promised his people. But the strength he needed was more than physical strength. He needed to be strong in the Lord. Why? God said, “because you will lead these people...” The LORD God said to Joshua, “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” How was Joshua to be strong in the LORD? God said, “Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go.” (Jos 1:7) There is another person who was advised to “be strong.” He was Solomon. As King David drew near to die, he charged his son Solomon, “be strong, show yourself a man, and observe what the LORD your God requires: Walk in his ways, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements, as written in the Law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go...” (1Ki 2:2-3)

Paul says, “Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.” Paul repeats in his letter the words: “in the Lord,” “in Christ,” “in him.” The strength of Christians is in the Lord. Those who are in the Lord can fight a good fight, a spiritual battle. Look at verse 11. “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.” As we know, Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter. Perhaps there was a Roman soldier in full armor, posted at his cell, which inspired this imagery. Paul likened a soldier and his armor to a Christian in spiritual warfare.

Who is our enemy? Look at verse 12, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” Some people say, “I don’t believe the devil exists.” They are spiritual blind and ignorant. They may blame evil activity on earth as the result of mental or chemical imbalances. But those with spiritual sense know that there is a spirit who is at work in those who are disobedient, lewd, angry, disrespectful, rebellious, vain, arrogant, prideful, etc. These dark forces work in people to lead them astray from God and the truth. Look at verse 13. “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.” For the second time Paul says, “put on the full armor of God.” We are under spiritual attack and assault. Then what is the full

armor of God we must put on? Paul tells us in verses 14-18. Let's read these verses. "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, 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 pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

The belt of truth. What is truth? Jesus said, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." (Jn 18:37) Jesus also said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." (Jn 14:6) Jesus often said, "I tell you the truth..." The truth is what is self evident of God and man. God's word reveals the truth. Some self evident truths are: God created the world, including all people; people are imperfect and need salvation; there are evil and good forces in the world—evil forces try to disrupt God's work and damage his kingdom; good forces glorify God and build and advance his kingdom. Without the truths of God given to us in the Bible, we end up living by common sense, experience, and men's fallen theories and ideas. Without the belt of truth, we fall flat on our faces.

The breastplate of righteousness. In the Old Testament, the high priest put a breastplate of decision over his heart. His decisions were not pragmatic for his own benefit, comfort or pleasure. He had to make decisions for the spiritual good of God's people (Ex 28:29-30). The breastplate covers the heart. Proverbs 4:23 says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." Then what is the breastplate of righteousness, and how can we put it on? Jesus is the Lord our Righteousness (Jer 23:6; 1Co 1:30). No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law, that is to say, by his own effort or attempts at goodness. We must put on the righteousness of Jesus Christ. We can clothe ourselves with the righteousness of Jesus through faith in him and obedience to him (Ro 1:5; 3:21-22; 13:14).

Ready feet. Paul says we need feet fitted with shoes of readiness. This means we have to be ready to get up and go, not sit around as do-nothings. Abraham was a man with ready feet. When

God called Abraham's name he answered, "Here I am." (Ge 22:1,11) His attitude was one of readiness. Jesus told us to be ready for his return. We should also be ready to share our faith and hope in Christ with others. This will not come through surfing television channels or surfing the internet. Peter wrote, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..." (1Pe 3:15) Are you ready to participate in gospel work this new school year?

The shield of faith. The shield of faith can extinguish flaming arrows of the devil. What are the flaming arrows? The devil hurls at us things like accusations, condemnations, insults, discouragements, disappointments, missed appointments. Yesterday, a man rebuked me saying, "Hey, you in the car, you want to move your car out of the crosswalk?!" I did not say what I was thinking. God helped me to say, "Sure." In our pride, we are so easily upset by an insult or even a small correction. Especially, the devil delights when we despair and decide to do nothing for Christ. The devil works in two primary ways: one is to prevent people from coming to Jesus for salvation, and the other is to make followers of Christ ineffective do-nothings. Faith in Jesus shields us from the devil's assaults.

The helmet of salvation. A helmet protects our head or mind. Jesus is our salvation. Through him, we have the forgiveness of sins and a glorious inheritance in his kingdom (1:7,18). We have this assurance based on God's promises. We must guard our minds with this assurance of God's saving grace, through his promises.

The sword of the Spirit—the word of God. Once I stepped on to a CTA bus with my Bible in hand and the bus driver said, "I see you have the sword of the Lord in your hand." With a smile I replied, "That's right." Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates, even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." The word of God is powerful. Don't depend on psychology to fight spiritual battles. One dollar will not really help a beggar. But even one word of God can.

Prayer. The final battle equipment for Christian soldiers is prayer. Paul says to pray on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. And these prayers are not just for ourselves. We should always keep on praying for all the believers we know, especially those who are under enemy assault. One person who prays can accomplish much, for God is the one who does the work. Now we are entering a new school year of ministry. It is prime time to pray and to put on the full armor of God.

Life is a battle. Are you engaged in the battle? Have you put on the full armor of God through humble Bible study? Have you clothed yourself with Jesus Christ through repentance? Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God. Pray. Obey the Lord and those he has placed over us. Then we will be able to stand in the battle of life. Let's pray.