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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## Defense Wins Championships

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ JULY 31, 2017

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### Ephesians | Part 6

**T**his summer we have been studying the Book of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul's basic instruction manual for successful Christian living. We come today to the final chapter. Having told us so much about what we need to know and how we are to act, Paul draws his book to a powerful conclusion.

Sometimes "final words" are just minor afterthoughts or incidentals, tacked on to a written or oral communication like a postscript. The final credits of a movie are usually ignored by the audience, as they get up to leave the theater. Imagine a wife sending this text message late one afternoon to her husband: *"Just got back with Amanda from our trip to the dentist. She had one cavity to be filled. Am starting dinner now while the kids do homework. Love, Sally. P.S. Can you pick up some milk and bread on your way home."* The shopping list was just a minor addendum to the end of the message.

But then there are final words that have great meaning. George Washington's Final Address before he left office was so profound and significant in laying out a vision for our young country that it was printed and spread through the 13 states, and is studied by historians and political analysts to this day. The NBA champion's coach, Steve Kerr, huddled with his team before they went out on the court to win their climactic final game last month, and he eloquently pulled together everything he had been teaching them to send them to victory. That is the sort of "final words" we find at the

end of Ephesians 6. Paul our spiritual coach is giving us the key instructions to enable us to live victoriously. Let's read carefully what he says.

A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>11</sup>Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. <sup>12</sup>For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

<sup>13</sup>Therefore, put on every piece of God's armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. Then after the battle you will still be standing firm. <sup>14</sup>Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness. <sup>15</sup>For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared. <sup>16</sup>In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil. Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

<sup>18</sup>Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.

*{Ephesians 6: 10-18, NLT}*

## **The Armor of God**

This well-known passage of scripture describes for us, through the use of an extended analogy or comparison, what Paul calls "the armor of God." He is imagining in his mind the typical professional Roman legionnaire of his day, and the uniform and weapons common to him. It's possible that Paul was actually looking at a soldier as he wrote these words—for he was, at the time he wrote Ephesians, under house arrest in Rome—and an armed guard was assigned to watch him day and night. For the sake of our time, I will summarize briefly the main principles we can draw from these final words of the Apostle.

## **Our Real Enemy**

We are reminded that life involves struggle. This should not be a surprising or startling discovery, for we have all been in the challenging arena. Of course, life also has many blessings and joys and pleasures, and occasionally brings us seasons when the struggles are fewer and we are refreshed and renewed. But in an imperfect world, nothing of importance can ever be accomplished without some struggle. We struggle to build and create, to establish marriages and raise families, to achieve goals in our careers and our organizations. And we struggle within, due to our human weaknesses and frailties and temptations. And we struggle to get along with other imperfect persons who are often difficult to deal with. Rather than deluding ourselves into thinking that life is supposed to be easy, Paul—the ultimate realist—prepares us for what we will face.

We need to recognize who our real enemy is. Our ultimate opponent does not have a human body. There is real evil in the world--whether you want to imagine it as an individual being, a fallen angel with superhuman power called Satan; or imagine an array of spiritual forces that Paul describes in verse 12:

“For we are not fighting against flesh and blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.”

I have a hard time picturing what Paul is talking about, but I will take his word for it. Just as God is invisible, so are his arch-enemies. And the cosmic spiritual battleground is our human souls. Why is it important to realize this? We certainly do have human beings, men and women of every race and nation, who hate the principles of Christ and are intent on opposing His kingdom in this world. Islamic terrorists, criminals and drug gangs, human traffickers, pornographers, aggressive atheists, politicians and journalists

and celebrities who spread hate and divisiveness: there are people who have been blinded by evil in this world. But at the core they are misled human beings; they've been duped and manipulated by the evil power. They are its often unwitting tools, sometimes even justifying their actions and thinking they are in the right. And yet, though we oppose evil actions and intentions, we Christians still love our enemies—because they are fallible human beings. We pray that somehow some of them may yet be saved and come to Christ (whose sacrifice on the cross is sufficient to cover even their sins if they will but repent). We do not hate the people who oppose us. But we do hate that hopelessly unrelenting evil that inspires them, just as Christ hated Satan and opposed and defeated him.

### **Standing Firm**

Our goal is to stand our ground. Paul tells us to “*stand firm*” in verse 11, and again in verse 13 he says, “*after the battle you will still be standing firm*”. Then in verse 14 he encourages us to “*stand your ground.*” It is not an aggressive war we wage, but a defensive one, to hold on to what Christ has already conquered for us. We already have His kingdom, both on this earth and in the life to come. We already have forgiveness of our sins, His mercy and grace, His comfort, His power, and the unity that He has accomplished with all our brothers and sisters in the faith. Ephesians has explained it all to us. The saying in team sports circles is that “defense wins championships” and it often has proven to be true. Coach Paul would agree. If we stand firm and do not surrender or compromise or lose faith or waver, the ultimate triumph will be ours.

### **Powerful Weapons**

We may only use certain weapons, but they are powerful. Our opponents, both human and demonic, employ terrible and destructive weapons against the cause of Christ. They routinely and brazenly will lie, slander, employ violence, resort to hypocrisy and mocking, cheat, abuse power, and tempt by peer pressure and

appeals to our worst natures. They will deny the conscience God has built within every person and even try to rewrite ethics and morality to fit their own preferences. We need to be open eyed and vigilant to recognize these tactics and expose them. But we are not permitted to respond in kind. Even the noblest end does not justify corrupt means. When we sink to the level of our enemies and act like them, we lose. We surrender our integrity and character and faith and become like them—which is actually what the evil power, our true enemy, wants us to do.

The weapons of Christ are the ones He provides to us. They may seem at first blush to be weaker and less effective than the weapons and tactics of our enemy. But there is remarkable spiritual power in them that the evil side does not understand and cannot overcome. Here is a quick inventory of our weapons: Truth (which all the lies and smokescreens of the devil cannot change):

- Righteousness (a conscience clear life of “walking in the light”)
- The Gospel (the gracious offer to all people to lay down their weapons of resistance and surrender to the God who made them and loves them)
- Faith (that confidence that sees beyond the visible to the invisible, and claims the timeless promises of God)
- Salvation (the security that nothing in this world or eternity—not even death itself—can separate us from our Savior)
- Scripture (the written Word of God, sharp and powerful)
- Prayer (the opportunity to draw on spiritual reinforcements from above anytime and anywhere)

### **We Are the Bricks**

Each Christian has an important role in the struggle. You and I don’t have the option to be “conscientious objectors” and opt out of the great conflict. Our Lord needs every one of us. In most wars America has had to fight in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only a small slice of our population actually had to sacrifice; most of the rest of the citizens could go blissfully about their personal business while our soldiers

fought far away. But there was a different spirit in this country during the Second World War. Every single American felt that they were part of the war effort. Those who remained stateside sacrificed to support those on the front lines: rationing, war bonds, scrap metal drives, working in defense industries, sending ‘care packages’ through the Red Cross or the USO. Even self-absorbed Hollywood celebrities traveled to boost the morale of the troops. Because we were all committed, our nation prevailed against very powerful enemies. In comparison, some military historians have noted that the wars in Vietnam and Iraq ended differently. Though some would argue that those were the wrong wars to fight, a significant factor in their outcome was clearly that many Americans did not “own” those wars or support them, and when the going got tough and the conflict continued, we did not have the will to persevere.

Every Christian needs to share in our united effort. We need to take seriously that our lives and our faith can impact others—not only in the circle of influence we personally have with our family, friends and co-workers, but also by joining with others in our church to stand firm for our faith and values. We know that some individuals and churches (including some of my fellow-pastors), wanting very much to avoid conflict, or desiring to be liked and accepted and to fit in with the unbelieving secular culture, have been silent or have compromised their convictions. Contemporary American Christian author Anthony Esolen gets right to the point:

“We must be clear about this. The world around us is not Christian. It is not even sanely pagan. It is quite mad and quite unhappy. We cannot minister to them by appearing to be pagan or compromising our message. We can minister to them only by being sharply distinct. Those in the world who are weary of its broken promises will not listen to us if we speak the language of the world. They are longing for a different language entirely—the real language of God.”

So these are our final words of instruction in Ephesians. We all have a part in the great struggle of the ages. Our personal choices matter.

The king of ancient Sparta once was traveling in another part of Greece. He came to a city that had high defensive walls surrounding it, and on meeting the king of that city he commented on its impressive walls. That king replied that he would like to return the visit and see the walls of Sparta. When he arrived, he found an attractive and well-ordered city laid out pleasingly on the plain, but no walls at all surrounding it. Wondering how Sparta could defend itself, the other king asked the Spartan king “where are your walls?” He was taken to the training ground, where the crack troops were practicing their skills. The king of Sparta pointed to his men and said, “These are the walls of Sparta, and every man is a brick.” In the same way, Paul points to us and says, “These are the walls of the church of Christ, and each of us is a brick.”



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