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Who's Your Real Enemy? Ephesians 6:10-20

I once dated a demon. I mention this only because it is one reason why some of you may struggle with what I'm going to say today and next week. I'll not mention her name, but I believe today she's living in Tulsa. In case you didn't know, I graduated from Duncan High School, in Duncan, Oklahoma. We were affectionately, or in some cases, derisively known as the Duncan Demons. The "demon" in question, whom I briefly dated, was of course our female mascot who at each football or basketball game would dress up in a red suit with horns and a long tail.

It is that image of a demon or perhaps even the Devil himself that leads a lot of people to scoff and mock at the idea that there are in literal reality such spiritual beings. In his classic work, *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis portrays for us a senior demon by the name of Screwtape giving advice to a young upstart demon named Wormwood. Said Screwtape to Wormwood:

"I do not think you will have much difficulty in keeping the patient in the dark [by the "patient" he means you and me]. The fact that 'devils' are predominantly comic figures in the modern imagination will help you. If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights, and persuade him that since he cannot believe in that . . . he therefore cannot believe in you."

It's really quite stunning when you stop to think about it. People don't make fun of the existence of God. Even atheists acknowledge that a good case can be made for the existence of a sovereign, spiritual, supernatural being we call "God". And no one, of course, who believes in God would deny that he has created people called "human beings" who are capable of both good and evil. Most who believe in God also affirm the existence of good, holy spiritual beings called "angels." So why do so many resist the idea of evil, unholy spiritual beings called "demons"?

Not long ago (September, 2013) *New York* magazine conducted an interview with Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. What caught the editors of the magazine by surprise wasn't any particular political or legal opinion of Scalia. What threw them into a virtual tizzy was that Scalia confessed that he believes in a literal, personal Devil.

So what do *you* believe? I have no problem at all believing in the existence and activity of a sizeable group of fallen, evil angels that the Bible calls demons. I read it everywhere in Scripture, and I must confess I've had my fair share of very real personal encounters with a few.

But how important is this for you and me today, in 2016, when other matters like the plummeting stock market and the price of oil and the impending Presidential election are upon us? Is it really wise or helpful to spend time talking about "demons" and the "Devil"? Yes, in fact it is. I would go so far as to say that few things are more important, especially given what we've been seeing and experiencing here at Bridgeway. Let me explain.

On many occasions you've heard me quote the words of J. I. Packer, well-known author of the best-selling book *Knowing God*. In a short volume he wrote on the subject of revival, Packer said something that has stuck with me these many years. "**Whenever God moves,**" said Packer, "**Satan keeps pace.**" Surely you don't think that Satan will make no effort at all to thwart or undermine or in some way distract us from the remarkable and miraculous things we've been seeing here lately. There is a fresh spiritual and supernatural energy in our midst, as seen in the many physical healings of late. We've seen several people come to saving faith in Jesus. And more and more people are making their way to Bridgeway, for whatever reason. And I'm here to tell you something without the slightest hint of melodrama or manipulation: Satan won't sit idly by without attempting to push back.

I don't know what his tactics will be. I don't presume to understand his ways perfectly. But the Apostle Paul, here in Ephesians 6, provides us with the clearest and most vivid description of what we're up against and how we must prepare ourselves for this fight. With that in mind, let's turn our attention to this first of two studies on this most important passage.

Setting the Context

In Ephesians 4:1-6:9 the apostle provided us with a list of responsibilities for Christian living. The moral issues that he begins to address in 6:10 and following extend beyond simple questions of right and wrong and thrust us into the heart of a larger, indeed, *cosmic* battle in which our enemies are not primarily other human beings but spiritual beings of indescribable evil intent.

Many believe the imagery of “armor” came to Paul from his observation of the Roman soldier to whom he was chained (Eph. 6:20). Others think that the imagery of a soldier fully arrayed in battle armor is taken from Isaiah (11:4-5; 49:2; 52:7; 59:17) which describes the armor of God and his Messiah. These texts portray the Lord of Hosts as a warrior dressed for battle as he prepares to fight on behalf of his people. Two passages will make this clear:

“but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins” (Isaiah 11:4-5).

“He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak” (Isaiah 59:17).

Thus the “full armor” that Paul will tell us to put on or with which we are to adorn ourselves is in fact God’s own armor. And Paul’s invitation is that we take it up and wear it even as God has worn it on our behalf. In other words, it is the armor of God not simply because he gives it, but because *he wears it!*

The various virtues and other items connected with these pieces of armor have already figured prominently in earlier portions of Ephesians: truth (1:13; 4:15,21,24,25; 5:9), righteousness (4:24; 5:9), peace (1:2; 2:14-18; 4:3), the gospel (1:13; 3:6), the word of God (1:13; 5:26), salvation (1:13; 2:5,8; 5:23), and faith (1:1,13,15,19; 2:8; 3:12,17; 4:5,13).

Nine Vital Truths about the Urgency of Spiritual Warfare

The best way to approach this crucial passage is phrase by phrase, verse by verse. As we do it becomes clear that there are nine truths to note.

1. *"Finally"*

It’s as if Paul says: “Finally, after all I’ve said, after all the doctrine, the exhortations, the rebukes, the encouragement, here is one more thing. *I’ve saved it for last, not because it’s least important, but because it’s the greatest threat.* Something threatens to undermine and subvert everything we’ve talked about. So pay close attention!”

Some suggest that “finally” means “from now on” (cf. Gal. 6:17) or “for the remaining time,” referring to the period between the first and second comings of Jesus. I.e., the idea is that from now on, at all times until Jesus comes, we are at war. Be alert. Be armed. There is never a truce or ceasefire. Satan takes no holidays. He observes no Sabbath rest. There may be times of greater and lesser intensity, but never a time to relax or let down your spiritual guard. In all likelihood, both ideas are present in this word.

2. *“Be strong in the Lord”*

The verb is best taken as a passive: “be strengthened” or “be made strong” (with the implication, “by God”; cf. 3:16). The simple exhortation “Be strong!” is both dangerous and useless. *Self-reliance in spiritual warfare is suicidal.* Believers do not strengthen themselves. Our strength must come from an external source, namely, the Lord. *The strength of an earthly general is in his troops. But in the Christian life, the strength of the troops is in their general!* See Joshua 1:6-9 (esp. v. 9b). The exhortation to “be strong and courageous” is grounded in the reassuring promise that “the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (v. 9b). Consider these other examples of God’s strength in the lives of his people:

- “And David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in soul, each for his sons and his daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God” (1 Sam. 30:6).
- "Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the Lord to you, 'Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God's'" (2 Chron. 20:15).
- "I love you, O Lord, my strength" Psalm 18:1).
- "For who is God, but the Lord? And who is a rock, except our God, the God who equipped me with strength, and made my way blameless?" (Psalm 18:31-32).
- “For you equipped me with strength for the battle; you made those who rise against me sink under me” (Psalm 18:39).
- "The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him. The Lord is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his anointed" (Psalm 28:7-8).
- “But I will sing of your strength; I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning. For you have been to me a fortress and a refuge in the day of my distress. O my Strength, I will sing praises to you, for you, O God, are my fortress, the God who shows me steadfast love” (Psalm 59:16-17).
- “Awesome is God from his sanctuary; the God of Israel – he is the one who gives power and strength to his people. Blessed be God! (Psalm 68:35).
- “Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant, and save the son of your maidservant" (Psalm 86:16).
- “The Lord is my strength and song, he has become my salvation" (Psalm 118:14).
- “Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle he is my steadfast love and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer; my shield and he in whom I take refuge; who subdues peoples under me” (Psalm 144:1-2).

The “strength” to which Paul refers is none other than the “strength” he described in Ephesians 1:19ff., the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him above all authority!

“and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:19-23).

The same trio of Greek terms is used in both passages: *dunamis*, *kratos*, and *ischus*. Cf. Eph. 3:16; Col. 1:11,29. So, how strong is God? Is he weaker now than he was in the first century? Have his spiritual muscles atrophied? Is God out of shape?

How might we obtain this "strength", this "power"?

- through prayer;
- by fasting;
- by making certain that biblical truth is forever flowing in our spiritual veins;
- through the fellowship and encouragement of other Christians;
- through praise and worship and adoration;
- by drawing near to God;
- by partaking of the Lord's Supper;
- through the anointing and filling of the Holy Spirit;
- through the proper exercise of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:7-11); and
- by adorning ourselves with the armor of God (Eph. 6).

3. ***"Put on the whole armor of God"***

We aren't born (or born again) with the armor on! We must *put* it on. Also, once put on, the armor should never be taken off, even if we think hostilities have subsided. Walk in it, work in it, sleep in it, eat in it! ***It is never safe to disrobe.*** Talking about the armor, describing the armor, declaring the importance of the armor, is never enough. You must use it!

4. ***“that you may be able to stand” / “stand firm”***

This goal for which we arm ourselves is repeated four times in this paragraph (vv. 11, 13 [twice], and 14). Clearly Paul wants us to be immovable and steadfast and unshaken by the attacks of the enemy (see Eph. 4:14. He means that we are to hold our position, to resist, to refuse to surrender ground to the enemy, to preserve and maintain what has already been won.

We must never forget that the decisive victory over the demonic realm has already been won by God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We are here called to “stand” on the truth of what Jesus has done and all that is ours in and through him. However, although the ultimate outcome has already been determined, we are still in a war with our Enemy. Whereas we may suffer minor defeats or setbacks along the way we must never be discouraged or disheartened, because Satan’s final demise is as certain as is our ultimate victory.

5. ***“The schemes of the devil”***

The word translated "schemes" = lit., *methodeias* ("methods"), i.e., wiles, tactics, stratagems, secret agendas. The plural of this word “suggests attacks that are constantly repeated or of incalculable variety” (O’Brien, 463). What are they? Temptation, accusation, intimidation, humiliation, shame, division and other such assaults against individual believers and the church corporately. But are all Satan's "methods/tactics" explicitly revealed in Scripture?

Question: ***“If YOU were the devil, what tactics would you employ?”***

One especially effective tactic of Satan during times of spiritual renewal and revival is not so much to promote explicit error but to push Christians ***beyond*** truth. Here’s what I mean. Satan will typically fail to prevent us from the pursuit of truth. As much as he may try, he rarely will succeed in driving us backwards into theological error. You won’t find Christians during seasons of renewal denying Christ’s deity or bodily resurrection or salvation by grace. Rather, Satan simply does a 180 and devotes all his energy to pushing us in the direction of truth.

But why would he do that, you ask? Because he doesn’t stop with pushing us into truth. ***He pushes us beyond it into excess and fanaticism.*** Truth taken to an unbiblical and unhealthy extreme can be just as destructive as blatant error and falsehood. This is what has happened in virtually every revival in church history. Some examples of this might be:

“Oh, isn’t it wonderful that God has healed some! Surely, then, it must be his purpose to heal all.” And when that doesn’t happen, Satan accuses people of not having enough faith and accuses God of not caring enough for his children and thereby undermines our confidence in his goodness.

“Oh, isn’t it wonderful that we are hearing God’s voice in prophetic words and inward impressions of his Holy Spirit!” Yes it is. But before you know it, people have abandoned their focus on Scripture and listening to God in his written Word, thinking it to be less exciting and less personal than getting a direct revelation from his Spirit.

“Oh, isn’t it wonderful to see how quickly and decisively God moves in power! He appears to accomplish in a short time what used to take us weeks, even months.” And before you know it, people have abandoned the daily discipline of prayer and Bible study and mutual encouragement and the ordinary means of grace by which we are sanctified.

“Oh, isn’t it wonderful what happens in corporate worship and prayer! It only makes sense that we should cancel our small groups and other activities and even minimize the preaching of God’s Word so that we might have more time to experience God’s presence.” And before you know it, the life of a local church is

woefully out of balance, having taken what is good and truthful and life-changing and used that as an excuse to ignore the less sensational responsibilities that the Bible requires of us.

Again, what is happening in each of these instances? ***It isn't that Satan tries to persuade us that we are wrong in emphasizing healing and prophetic words and powerful personal encounters and life-changing supernatural experiences. He'll never succeed in that effort. So, he doesn't stand in front of us and try to push back. Rather, he takes what is right and good and true and stands behind us, pushing us faster and farther than we should go in such a way that we move beyond biblical boundaries into excess, fanaticism, and theological error.***

So, don't for a millisecond back down from embracing the good things God has done. Don't for a millisecond put the brakes on your wholehearted pursuit of God's power and presence. But be wise and discerning and careful that you do not let a good thing become the only thing and in doing so fall into unbiblical and unbalanced fanaticism.

6. ***We "wrestle"***

The Greek term translated "wrestle" (*pale*), used only here in the NT and never in the LXX. It means to struggle or strive. ***The Christian never coasts or ambles or skips merrily along the yellow-brick road to paradise. We wrestle! We struggle! We wage war!***

Why did Paul use a sporting term in a context pertaining to armor and military preparedness? Why didn't Paul use the term *strateia* = warfare (2 Cor. 10:4; 1 Tim. 1:18) or *mache* (2 Cor. 7:5; 2 Tim. 2:23; Titus 3:9) or even *agon* (Phil. 1:30; Col. 2:1)?

The answer would appear to be grounded in the fact that wrestling was an extremely popular event in the athletic games held in Asia Minor, particularly in Ephesus. Thus "in contrast to the flesh-and-blood wrestling, with which the readers of Ephesians would have been quite familiar, the true struggle of believers is a spiritual power encounter which requires spiritual weaponry" (Clinton Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, p. 117).

Ephesus was famous for the magical arts, principal among which were the "Ephesian Letters" (*Ephesia grammata*). These six magical terms/names (*askion, kataskion, lix, tetrax, damnameneus, and aisia*) were alleged to possess power that would ward off evil spirits. People used them as either spoken charms or written amulets to obtain power and to protect them from harm.

According to one popular story of the day, an Ephesian wrestler was unbeatable in the ancient Olympics because he wore the "Ephesian Letters" around his ankle. When this was discovered by the officials it was removed, after which he proceeded to lose three consecutive matches! Paul may have been alluding to this story with his use of the Greek word *pale*.

So, says Paul, both to the Ephesians and to us today, don't trust in magic. Don't trust in amulets or charms or tokens or special words that you mistakenly believe carry supernatural power. Instead, trust in God and his power that comes to you when you faithfully adorn yourselves with the spiritual armor he has made available.

7. ***"We do not wrestle against flesh and blood"***

By "flesh and blood" Paul means humanity, people: men and women (Matt. 16:17; Gal. 1:16; Heb. 2:14). Behind and beneath the daily, earthly struggles with people and institutions and ideologies is an unseen spiritual battle. However, this is not to suggest that Paul intends an absolute negation (cf. Luke 10; esp. Eph. 4:14). The point is not to deny that we have earthly and human antagonists. The point is that even when we do fight them, Satan lurks behind their efforts (see Matt. 16:23).

8. Our struggle, our battle is ***"against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places"***

What does Paul have in mind by these terms?

- rulers/ principalities (*arche*) – A ruler must have someone or something over which to exercise dominion (Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10; Rom. 8:38).
- authorities (*exousia*) – Again, authority, by definition, demands a subordinate (Eph. 1:21; 3:10; Col. 1:16).
- cosmic powers (*kosmokratoras*) – Used only in Eph. 6:12; their realm as well as their character is referred to as “this present darkness,” something from which believers have been delivered (see Eph. 5:8; Col. 1:13).
- spiritual forces (or, spiritual hosts) of wickedness in the heavenly places – It may well be that this is not a separate class of cosmic powers but rather a general term for all the preceding spirits and an indication of their locality.

If all angels and demons are of the same type or rank or carry the same authority, why are they described by such a variety of terms? It would also seem that with difference in rank comes difference in power, task, etc., although we must be careful of unhealthy speculation. Remember this: our struggle is against *subjected powers!* See Ephesians 1:19ff. No matter how frightening or intimidating they may be, they have already been defeated and put under the feet of Christ (see Col. 2:15).

We should take brief note of a trend since WW II of identifying these “powers” not with personal spiritual beings, i.e., demons, but with structures of society and thought: tradition, custom, laws, authority, religious systems, economic philosophies, political parties, governmental organizations, etc. This view is found in the writings of Walter Wink (*Naming the Powers, Unmasking the Powers, and Engaging the Powers*). This view cannot be supported by the evidence in Paul’s writings. However, as O’Brien points out, “to reject the *identification* of the powers with human traditions and sociopolitical structures . . . is not to deny that these supernatural intelligences work through such agencies” (469).

9. “*in the evil day*”

This phrase appears nowhere else in Paul in precisely this form, although “the present evil age” is found in Gal. 1:4 and in Eph. 5:16 Paul said “the days are evil.” Commentators usually point to one of three possibilities or a combination of them:

- It is synonymous with “the evil days” of 5:16 and refers to the whole of this present age between the two comings of Jesus.
- It refers to a single day of unique tribulation just before the coming of Christ.
- It points to critical times in a believer’s life when demonic activity is especially intense and focused.

O’Brien is probably correct when he says that “the apostle is not only speaking of this present time between the two comings of Jesus, but is also alerting believers to the dangers of the devil’s schemes on critical occasions in this present evil age. There may appear to be times of reprieve for Christians, but they must not be lulled into a false sense of security, thinking that the battle is over or that it is not especially difficult. They must always be prepared and put on the full armour of God, for the devil will attack when least expected” (471-72).

Concluding thoughts . . .