

MAKING YOUR DAY IN THE GODLY WAY: STANDING STRONG IN THE FAITH



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

this way forward

Ephesians 6:10-20

August 26, 2018

Dr. Thomas E. Evans

Through our series, *Making your Day the Godly Way*, we see the Bible is very realistic; it is going to be hard, not easy:

hard to say the words that build up;

hard to give thanks in all things;

hard to make a melody that sings,

hard to think thoughts of love about your friends all the time, much less your enemies;

...so Paul tells us...stand firm!! Put on the whole armor of God!

This morning we shall learn how to hold the shield of faith, the nature of our true enemies as Christians, and what it means to be strong "in the Lord".

The shield is a defensive weapon. Paul means for us to wield this shield not so much to protect against our enemies but our own weak wills.

People often give into temptation because they fail to stay shielded in the faith.

When I served in Birmingham and Atlanta as the Executive Presbyter, one of my tasks was dealing with the fallout from pastors' affairs. Many times, they devastated the congregations for years to come. They led to lawsuits, factionalized churches, and, in one case, death. When a mother heard about her daughter's affair with a pastor, she died of a heart attack, right on the spot.

We taught pastors not to even entertain flirtatious thoughts, much less engage in them. Sometimes making even a little room in your heart leads to one step after another. While it seems extreme, the sheer number of cases warranted a disciplined mind at all times. The most recent Catholic scandal in Pennsylvania demonstrates the need for a shield, in spades.

Don't give temptation even the merest corner to grab hold of; that is why alcoholics can never take a drink.

The temptations the Ephesians faced were to sacrifice to pagan idols, like everyone else in that time did. This meant paying homage to Caesar to avoid ridicule from their neighbors or blame for crop failure. The people of Rome were constantly blaming disasters on Christians' refusal to pay homage to Caesar and the gods. It is for this reason the Romans were happy to see Christians fed to the lions. If you thought someone else was to blame for your family's starvation or the earthquake that leveled your town, how would you feel about them?

But Christians were to shed their old ways for a new, Godly pattern of living. With their new-found faith they would need to be especially diligent to the old ways of believing.

Of course, we have all seen an overly cautious church become so puritanical that it doused the joy of living. Many churches frowned on dancing or card playing. Undoubtedly there were cases of card playing resulting in losing a family's nest egg and dancing leading to something more.

Now, the church relies more on the individual to know their weaknesses. If gambling is a vice for you, if it leads you to risk more, then don't do it. But if playing cards is just a fun game to pass the time, by all means enjoy. Today we understand that pattern of living not as "don't have fun or play games on Sunday" but rather "don't let the pleasures of life cause you to do things that fail to bring God glory or show love for your family".

In this way, the shield of faith need not deprive you of all earthly pleasure. The shield must be individually fashioned to combat your own temptations.

But the shield of faith is actually a more active discipline than avoiding bad thoughts. It means

putting in front of you those things in life you truly value.

When temptation of any kind besets you, hold your loved ones at the forefront of your mind. Consider how misbehavior might affect their lives. Some G.I.'s would keep a picture of their wife in their pocket, not only to remind them of why they were fighting but having her right there made it that much harder to stray.

You know the nature of your own temptations that cause you to stray from faithful living. Construct your own personal shield of faith. It will include those you love; it will include those things you hold of deep value, whether it is your integrity, your reputation, or a clean conscious that allows you to sleep at night. Hold that shield in your heart; hold it up before your thoughts and expectations. And be sure to weave throughout that shield the Spirit of God, whom you want to thank, through living a life that honors our Lord.

Calling upon the Holy Spirit as part of your shield of faith is critical to a sound defense. To be fully armored in faith means being ever aware of God's presence, because it is not simply our own weaknesses we are combatting.

"Leave no room for the devil," the Bible tells us. It is the weakness of our own flesh and blood, giving into what may seem like little temptations, that allow a greater destructive force to take hold.

Paul tells us our "enemies are not of flesh and blood."

The Bible talks a lot about evil spirits, the devil, the powers, and the principalities. I am not sure precisely what I believe of such things, given modern science, but I do believe there are forces out there bent on turning us away from divine things.

When Paul speaks of Sin he does so with a capital "S", not the sins (little 's') we commit every day. Sin is a condition of the spirit not individual acts. Like buboes are a symptom of the bubonic

plague not the disease itself. They show us a great sickness has control of our body.

I believe evil is real. It is not just the bad things we do, accumulated over time. Evil is like an infection that grows in your mind and in your heart, an infection that most of the time starts out small, that, if left unattended, will fester and grow until it allows you, step by step, to become something as horrific as a Nazi soldier.

Not all of the soldiers were bent on evil and world domination. But, all of them who put on that uniform opened themselves up to be dominated by forces of evil.

So, Paul instructs us to be strong. Strong...in the Lord. Not strong in our own strength or will or power, the strength must be of God and from God.

The world emphasizes strength; that is power: political power, physical power, charismatic power, economic power. Jesus eschewed all of these.

Paul is leading us away from this worldly type of strength to strength in the Lord. Neither Paul nor Jesus ever advocated a literal war with Rome. They realized to defeat one earthly enemy leaves the next waiting to rise up. Paul recognized the true enemies are sin, evil, and death. Our enemies are the weakness of the flesh, the lure of power, and evil forces bent on twisting your heart out of the divine shape God made it.

In fact, this is precisely the strategy that terrorists employ. They want you to hate them. They use random destructive acts to tempt us to become them.

Paul does not tell them to literally prepare for war, but rather...prepare to maintain steadfast to the faith so that you do not become the evil you abhor.

There are more important things to Paul and to Christ than prolonged life – there is truth, righteousness, and justice.

This is what made Martin Luther King so very effective. He wielded great strength. Not strength

of the arm, but of God's word. He held it like a shield before him; he used it to rally his forces and to defeat his enemies. But he did not hate his foes; in fact, he loved them.

Being strong in the Lord means being so utterly clear in your identity, as a forgiven and redeemed child of God, that all fears and instincts of self-preservation fade away. What remains is a heart filled with the purposes of God.

Yesterday, John McCain passed away. I'm sure none of us agree with all of his politics, but he was a person of faith, of quiet faith. He did something that all Christians should admire and strive for. When he was a prisoner of war, he refused out-of-sequence repatriation. They were going to let him go because he was an Admiral's kid, but he knew it wasn't his turn. He had the strength, through the power of prayer, to stay in a place of horrific evil and torture, because he knew it wasn't right to be free when someone else should go first.

When you are strong in the Lord, the only thing that's left in your heart is to fulfill the purposes of God. We might wonder... Where does somebody gain such strength; where does somebody get such focus and determination?

One of the best lessons I read about was about a 5-year-old boy:

In 1988 a little boy named Rocky, five years old, saved his mother's life. His mother was driving them to town when the truck careened over a 40-foot embankment out of sight from the road. The mother could barely move, her shoulders were broken, and there was blood in her eyes. She told Rocky to run from the truck because she was afraid it would explode.

He obeyed her but something pulled him back. His love for his mother. This 55-pound boy pushed, dragged and carried his mother all the way up that 40 foot bank. Somebody found them and rushed her to the hospital.

The whole way up Rocky repeated to himself "I think I can I think I can I think I

can". Of course his parents had read him the wonderful children's book "the little engine That could". But not just once it was his all-time favorite and he insisted that his parents read it to him again and again and again. That story sunk inside of him and became part of him so much so that those words gave him courage and strength.

(with thanks to James Goodloe,
Foundation for Reformed Theology)

Imagine the strength we would have, to do God's will, if we would carry in our hearts the power of the Word of God wherever we go.

It can be our shield of faith, so that we can resist temptation. It is the armor against evil, that seeks to turn us from the Lord. It can be our strength to do God's work – always.

Amen.