

Be Strong in the Lord

St. Mark Lutheran
Two services

Pastor Ken Welsh
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Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Ephesians 6:1-13

Many of you here today probably will remember one of America's great storytellers. His name was Paul Harvey, and he had a daily broadcast called *The Rest of the Story*. He often related unknown tales about various American people. But he also spoke some critical comments in regard to the state of American culture.

In one such commentary, back in 1964, he wrote a piece titled "If I Were the Devil". This was really a warning to America against the moral decay that Harvey believed was taking place. In this article, Harvey described how he believed the devil would attack and try to destroy the United States of America. One version of this states, "With flattery and promises of power, I would get the courts to vote against God and in favor of pornography...I would evict God from the courthouse, then from the schoolhouse, then from the Houses of Congress. Then in his own churches I'd substitute psychology for religion and deify science. If I were Satan, I'd make the symbol of Easter an egg and the symbol of Christmas a bottle. If I were Satan, I'd just keep doing what I am doing."

If Harvey were alive today, I think he would probably update his article, and it would sound even worse. There is considerable evidence that the attack Harvey feared is well under way. I think most of you are aware that there are well-financed groups seeking to get the words "under God" removed from the Pledge of Allegiance and "In God we trust" taken off of our coins, despite the fact that the vast majority of Americans support this practice. They also want crosses taken down in cemeteries for the military and any religious symbols on government buildings removed.

The same type of groups are working hard to get free speech banned on many university campuses. Last year one university in California used all sorts of tricks to stop a group of its students from their constitutional right to host a speaker. The student leader on campus was spit on, punched, and harassed. An instructor at a university in Florida instructed his class to write "Jesus" on a piece of paper, drop it on the floor, and stomp on it. When one student refused, he was kicked out of class.

The devil may well be influencing some Christian churches lately. We have practicing homosexuals and lesbians standing in the pulpits of some Christian churches. Obviously, the fact that the Holy Scriptures teach, both in the Old and New Testaments, that this is a sin, is being seriously compromised in those churches.

Let me share one more. It came to me last week from our communications department of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. They reported that Army Major Scott Squires, a Southern Baptist Chaplain, was approached by a same sex military couple who wanted to participate in a marriage retreat he was scheduled to lead. Squires followed the teachings of his church, and rather than say no and bring offense to the couple, he found another chaplain to lead the retreat and he respectfully bowed out. He is now on the verge of a court martial in the name of discrimination and facing possible discipline.

What should be a Christian's response to the evils of this day? As we read Paul's epistle this morning, I see two specific instructions. For one, Paul says, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil." Now the armor of God is not something you put on every day like a pair of jeans. It is not composed of items you put on to prepare for a physical battle. Each piece of the armor is a characteristic or quality that should be reflected in your daily life. They are characteristics of a sincere and significant faith.

I see six pieces of armor listed here. There is the belt of truth; the breastplate of righteousness; the shoes of the Gospel of peace; the shield of faith; the helmet of salvation; and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Now believe me when I say we could make a sermon out of any one of these.

But let's concentrate on the belt of truth today. A Roman soldier, in that day, wore a wide, thick leather belt that held his sword and equipment. It was used to cinch up his tunic or outer garment and allowed him freedom of movement. When he tightened up his belt, he was able to fight. In much the same way, truth is the essential centerpiece of the Christian life. It is on truth that all of our beliefs and convictions should rest. The knowledge of God's truth is essential for the believer so that he is not destroyed by the spiritual battle with Satan that we are in. Our lives need to be built on God's truth.

Contrary to popular belief truth is not relative. It is absolute. Truth does not change over time or at the whims of political correctness or social customs. What is moral, right and true today, was moral, right and true yesterday. And it will be moral, right and true tomorrow, no matter what the world says. Truth is not subjective; it has to be in line with the standard set by God.

That's not the story you are going to get from the world. That's not the story you are going to get on the television, or in most colleges and universities. They want to make the truth subjective to their own ideas and convictions. What is the standard of truth for the Christian? It is the Word of God and most importantly, the teachings of Jesus Christ. He said in John 14:6, "I am the way..." He also said that he was the truth.

And truth has been under attack by the devil ever since the creation of our first parents. All of history is filled with his attempts, either direct or indirect, to sabotage the truth about God and our salvation.

So our first point is to put on the armor of God. Paul has a second instruction in our reading this day. He says, "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might." The only way we can stand against Satan and his work is by realizing we don't have the strength within us. Paul himself, a former enemy of the cross who was changed by Jesus Christ, says that. He warns us, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Left to our own devices, we cannot stand. We are easy prey for the devil. In our human weakness, we easily stumble into traps of selfishness, greed, and idolatry. The strength we need to survive spiritually can only come from the Lord.

It almost seems like a paradox, doesn't it, that Jesus Christ was born into this world as a baby in humility and weakness, but he alone is our refuge and strength! He is the one who conquered sin by keeping the Law perfectly. He is the one who conquered death by his own death. He is the one who rose from the dead and has said, "Because I live, you shall live also." The Son of Man came and fulfilled the prophecy to crush Satan's head and open for us the way to everlasting life. That's who we get our spiritual strength from. That's why when Paul prayed for the Ephesians he prayed this, that they would be "strengthened with power through his Spirit ..." (Eph. 3:16)

How do we get that power through his spirit? Let's listen to Jesus one more time in John 6:63, "It is the Spirit that gives life: the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." We receive our strength when we are in contact with the word of God and the things of God. I can assure you that the dark forces of evil will continue to wage war against the saints of God. Our life this side of eternity will still be marred by our wrestling with a great enemy. We will probably continue to see Satan at work in the courthouses, schoolhouses, statehouses, and sometimes even our houses. But in the Lord's strength, we shall prevail. And we shall hear the great trumpet sound signalling the end of it all, and we shall see the Lord Jesus Christ returning in glory, and we shall receive our salvation. Amen.