

The Battle
Ephesians 6:10-14

Turn to Ephesians 6 please. We have a unity challenge. The covid-19 illness has been upon us for about twenty months. Our society is deeply divided about how to respond to the illness itself, how to respond to government regulations, how to respond to the vaccinations and to wearing masks, and details.

This is a problem in Canadian society, and also in other countries. The division is in most churches, and it is in our church. That's all a given.

Ephesians was written because of a different unity challenge. At the start of the church, on the day of Pentecost, there were only Jews in the church. But it did not take very long until Gentiles put their faith in Christ, and guess what, God sent them the Holy Spirit as well, which means they were in.

But Jews who grew up in faithful Jewish homes and obeyed the Scriptures had a very different understanding of following God than pagan Gentiles who had no understanding of God or of the Scriptures until they heard of Christ. And so when Paul writes letters, many churches had both, believing Jews and believing Gentiles.

And these two groups had such different ideas of what God was calling them to do, and what faithfulness to God meant. Could they even worship together? Was faith in Christ enough to bring them together? Romans and Ephesians are written more about this than any other issue. Acts as well has much to say about this.

Ephesians 1-3 show how the gospel of Christ makes Jews and Gentiles one new body in Christ. Christ died to make peace between these two groups. That's quite a line, isn't it. Christ died to get rid of the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. That's Ephesians 1-3.

Beginning at Ephesians 4:1, Paul writes about relationships. We read the opening verses last week. *Be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love.* From Eph 4:1 to 6:9, Paul encourages this kind of relationships in the church. It is all in the church.

In the last part of this he talks about relationships in the household, which is just more of the same: wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters. It all can be summarized, *be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love.*

And then in Eph 6:10 Paul begins to write about spiritual warfare. So I'm going to summarize this again. Ephesians has 3 parts. First, Eph 1-3, explains the gospel that makes Jewish believers and Gentile believers one new body in Christ. Second, in Eph 4 to the middle of 6 Paul teaches us about good relationships between believers.

Third, beginning in Eph 6:10 he seems to change topics completely – he teaches about our battle which is not against flesh and blood, but against dark spiritual rulers and powers and forces.

Is Paul, now at the end of his letter, bringing up something different? No, he's not. He's talking about the same thing. Dark spiritual rulers and forces are scheming to divide us, scheming to get us irritated at each other, to get angry and stay angry at each other.

When we say words that tear each other down, the Holy Spirit who sealed us for God is grieved (4:30). But the dark powers are cheering, because that's what they planned, to turn us against each other, and it worked.

Now we'll read our text and talk about it.

Eph 6:10-14 - Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 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. 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. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist.

The Armor of God.

Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God... Therefore put on the full armor of God. The different armor listed in vv14-17 are all mentioned in the OT, mostly Isaiah, and here's the crucial thing – it is always God's armor. It is never what God's people put on to go into battle, it is always what God puts on when God goes into battle.

“The armor of God” does not mean armor God recommends, or armor God offers us, it means the armor God himself uses. There is a real sense in which this is God's battle. He's using us as foot soldiers, but it is his power and strength that's making this work.

That means, when we bear with one another in love, and when we make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit, we are doing all we can, but our strength is not enough against the spiritual forces that want to divide us.

We can only bear with one another, and keep the unity of the Spirit, because the strength and power of the Lord himself is at work in this quiet battle. God's armor, God's strength.

Take Your Stand

Our Scripture uses the word “stand” four times. *Take your stand against the devil's schemes. Stand your ground. When all is done, stand. Stand firm then.*

This is not an offensive battle. This is a defensive battle. We are defending our homeland from attack. We've been given a position in Christ, we've been made one new body in Christ, the Holy Spirit has made us one, Christ died to get rid of barriers between us. Powerful invisible armies are trying to get us off our homeland, but we will not back up.

We will make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit, we will submit to one another, we will forgive one another. We will be completely humble and gentle and patient with each other. That is how we stand our ground.

There are six pieces of armor listed in vv14-17, and they are all protection. This battle is not about attack, it is about protection. Belt, breast-plate, shoes, shield, helmet, and sword.

The sword is for attack, although even there, if we're standing our ground, a sword is also to defend ourselves. I've watched competitive fencing, and they use their swords for defense as well as attack. We also use it to destroy what's attacking us. But overall the emphasis is to stand our ground, and we're equipped for that.

This is our homeland in different words: One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all. Homeland.

We do not Wrestle Against Flesh and Blood

We do not fight against flesh and blood, we do not struggle against flesh and blood. Paul is telling Jewish believers, "the Gentile believers in the church are not the ones causing you trouble." He's telling Gentile believers, "the Jewish believers in the church are not the ones causing the trouble."

You are up against the devil and his schemes, you are up against evil spiritual authorities and powerful dark powers that want to turn you against one another.

Think about the believers you struggle most to be patient with. Think about the people in this church who see things differently than you do, or who just do not act as they should act. This could well be in your own household. Wives and husbands, look at each other. Children and parents, look at each other.

Look at these people. Say to yourself, "in my struggle to get along with these people, I am not wrestling against any human, I am fighting the spiritual enemies of Jesus, my Lord and Master. Our relationships with one another are a spiritual battleground. Real spiritual forces, evil powers, are scheming and prompting us to turn against each other.

I grew up in a raw town. I have often seen two boys quarreling with each other, perhaps shoving, and the boys around them immediately urging them to fight, they wanted to see a fight. The devil's schemes and the evil forces and powers are not urging us to fight for their entertainment.

They are battling against our Lord with all their might. When we do the wrong thing, we need to make it right. We need to go to one another when we've done wrong to them, and when they've done wrong to us. Jesus encourages both of those. But what God tells us here is that the real energy behind our relational troubles is evil spiritual forces attacking our Lord through us.

In the beginning of Eph 2, Paul tells these believers that before you came to the Lord, "you used to follow the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." The ruler problem on earth is not the rulers of flesh and blood. The ruler problem is the ruler of the kingdom of the air who works in the disobedient.

Kittens on a Wash line

Here is cruel boys game that I have only heard about. You get two kittens, and you tie their tails together with a bit of string, perhaps a shoe lace. And then you hang the two kittens over a wash line. When I was younger and heard about this, every home had a wash line.

I've played with lots of kittens. They don't like being held up by their tails, but it's not the worst thing that you can do. But when they are over the wash line, they squirm for a while, they don't like this, they don't feel good, they'd like to get down. And then they start fighting with each other. And that's the point, to watch kittens fight with each other.

But people, the other kitten is not the problem, the other kitten is not the enemy of either kitten. Their enemy is not feline, it is human. Their enemy is the person that tied their tails together and put them over the wash line. Think about the people you have trouble getting along with. God says, you're not fighting against flesh and blood.

If one kitten bites the other, he should ask forgiveness. But the kittens have a common enemy that's much bigger than either of them, and that enemy set them up to fight with each other. That's why the call is, *be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit, who has bound us together with peace.*

A Sad Church Story

More than twenty years ago there was an unhappy situation in our church. Another family, an important family in our church, part of the founding group, had clear and strong ideas about how to handle this unhappy situation, and Marilyn and I had different way entirely about how to respond to this situation.

The division between us and this other family was painful, and lasted for perhaps a couple months. There were meetings and conversations back and forth, but they couldn't agree with us, and we couldn't agree with them. After a couple of months of this, they left our church. And that was painful as well, hard on the whole church.

A few months after they had gone, the unhappy situation resolved itself completely, in an unexpected way. And as I wondered about it all afterward, it occurred to me from Ephesians 6 that the unhappy situation that divided us was never the point. The challenge was not to handle that properly. The whole thing was an evil set up to divide us. And it worked.

The real battle was not, “what will we do about the unhappy situation,” the real battle was, “will we continue to live out the call of God to accept one another, or will we divide.” And that one we lost. And at the time, I did not know that was the real battle. We were kittens over the wash line.

Since then our two households have been much restored to each other, mostly through the work of Marilyn, no surprise there.

But now it does not take me so long to figure out our real agenda. When Paul wrote Ephesians, the unhappy situation was the huge difference between Jews and Gentiles regarding God and his ways. That was the unhappy situation, but that was not the battle, the battle was to live as one.

Now we have another situation, it has to do with covid and government regulations and vaccines and masks and so on. We are divided about this as we are about many things. But we will listen to our Lord, and he’s telling us that we are not wrestling against flesh and blood, either inside the church or flesh and blood outside the church.

We are wrestling against the devil’s schemes and powerful evil authorities that want us to divide about this. And covid will end, but there are all kinds of other things we will want to divide about, in our church and in our homes, in our marriages and with our parents and children. Those relationships are the real battle.

The Mission of the Church

The call to the church is to be united as one body. What we’re supposed to show the world and the evil powers is that what Christ has done is stronger, that what divides the world does not divide us, because we have Christ who accepts us and loves us and makes us one.

That is what makes us salt in the earth, and the light of the world. That is what makes us a city set on a hill. Here’s what God wants the world to say about us:

“Look at the church, those people have all the different opinions and arguments that we have, but because they have Christ, they are completely humble and gentle with each other. They are patient with each other. They bear with each other in love. They are bound together with peace. They are doing what we cannot do. How do they do that?”

That’s our mission, that’s the homeland that we fight to defend. It is a fight, but not against any flesh and blood. Amen.

PRAYER: Oh God, thank you for telling us what's really going on, and what we're really up against. No wonder this is so intense, so exhausting. Thank you for telling us the truth about this battle. And thank you that your strength and power is in the thick of this, thank you that you have put on us the armor that you yourself use. Thank you that your glorious might is carrying us along. And please help us, Father, help us fight the fight. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us a spirit of unity among ourselves as we follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.