

HOW TO STAND Ephesians 6:10-17

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*A sermon preached for First Baptist Church of Amarillo, TX
September 11, 2022*

I once was chosen to be a Roman soldier. It was one of those annual productions at the small Baptist church where I was raised. As far as typecasting goes, this was good news for a teenage boy. After all, one of the deacons was asked to be Judas. Roman soldier seemed like one of the better options you can be presented with. I felt good about it, until the director came around and handed me something resembling a leather skirt.

Was this hers? Had she just roughed up the edges? They assured me it was custom made for the occasion. The trouble was that the last guy who played this role was 5'8." It's not like these legs of mine got a lot of sun leading up to Easter, and the elevated stage wasn't going to help. Our youth group had a policy on this, and I wasn't sure this would even meet the fingertip length standard.

This wasn't even the most ill-fitting part of the outfit. To make matters worse, they showed me the armor. It looked like a plastic toy set from Walmart. The chest plate covered half of its intended area, and the helmet was pinching in on my temples. Even worse, someone had added red broom bristles to the top of the helmet but had given up trimming the edging halfway through the job. It looked like I had plans to sweep the air as I came down the aisle.

If the costume wasn't bad enough, Roman soldier doesn't really get a lot of lines. So, if you're going to really "own" the part and make it yours, you'll need to decide how you're going to stand. That's about all they need you to do. You could be a disinterested soldier (arms crossed) or maybe a just-left-the-weight-room soldier (arms out). You could be a highway repairman soldier (sits). You don't want to look like a lazy Roman soldier. How do you stand in that ill-fitting costume? There's really not a good way.

There are two things in view as Paul closes his letter to a young church at Ephesus. He will tell them both how to stand and what to wear.

You'll be glad to know that Paul isn't inviting you to wear the outfit, the panoply, of a Roman soldier today, but he has in mind certain things that you are to "put on" in this life if you are going to stand in the manner that God has called you to stand. I want to suggest to you a few exhortations Paul makes today about how we're supposed to stand in a day like ours.

The churches Paul writes to, and the others who would read this letter, were young and living as minorities in an unaccommodating world. They understand what it is like to struggle through

a world that doesn't welcome who God has called you to be. So, he writes, in summary, in Ephesians 6:10:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.

The first exhortation I want you to hear from Paul today is that you need to stand as if you are in the midst of a spiritual struggle.

1. Stand as if you are in a spiritual struggle.

For some of you, this is news today. Some of you are not aware of this, that there is a struggle that is happening in this world that is beyond what our eyes can see. In fact, the very suggestion of spiritual things of this nature, of the "powers of darkness," makes you uncomfortable. A pastor who picks up a passage like this might even have to consider how to preach the passage in a way that is palatable to everyone.

It was C.S. Lewis who wrote, in the introduction to his *Screwtape Letters*, that "there are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them."ⁱ

It's because of these two poles – the *disbelief* in the spiritual devils in this world and the *disproportionate interest* in them – that we get stuck trying to decide how to speak about spiritual things. We must navigate how to talk of the *real* evil presence in this world in a way that does justice to the Scriptures and is edifying to our experience. I'm here to tell you today that the struggle of spiritual things, not of flesh and blood, and the powers of darkness that are in this world are *real*. You need to stand as if you are in a spiritual struggle.

The first step to losing the spiritual battle that is happening in this world is to pretend as if it doesn't exist. There are many people today who are raising children, working in their lives, spending their time with family and friends as if there is no spiritual struggle taking place in this world.

Over 20 years ago, Andrew Delbanco wrote a kind of biography of how we talk about evil. Though a self-professed non-Christian perspective, he set out to show how we have lost the language of spiritual things. In his book, *The Death of Satan*, the very first sentence reads: "A gulf has opened up in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources available for coping with it... The repertoire of evil has never been richer. Yet never have our responses been so weak."ⁱⁱ His point is that we no longer know what to do with the worst things

in our midst. We have abandoned the names and explanations of evil we once knew and replaced them with nothing.ⁱⁱⁱ

With a view clouded by the whims of our present age (mostly in Western culture), we've forgotten that there is more to our lived experience than what our senses perceive. Or perhaps, you've demoted the spiritual things beneath what you can see and prove. We have explained everything with a modern mind, everything gets a scientific tag; and nothing is spiritual because spiritual is not "real." "Only what I can know and see and experience is real."

That's an odd place to live as a believer. It's an impossible place to stay as a Bible reader. The New Testament is replete with references to a spiritual war that wages in this creation. At every turn, the New Testament offers further examples of the struggle that is in our midst. It's undeniable and unavoidable.

It would have been less of a reminder for a 1st century church than it is today that there is a real spiritual struggle. If you ignore it, you are on your way to losing the battle. In most places in the world (Africa, Asia, Latin America), in most of its population, this is not a difficult subject. It takes a special kind of arrogance to dismiss that amount of collective wisdom and to assume that our lived experience and scientific minds have arrived in a now fully discernable world that others just could not properly explain.^{iv}

You need to stand as if there is a darkness that opposes the light in you.

Assuming this struggle against sin and evil in the world to be less real, less near, there are many believers – Christians – who will muddle through life, maybe even in a veil of success, not realizing that authentic discipleship to Jesus puts one at odds with the world. If you're flowing with the current, you've lost sight of the destination. There are forces in this world that long to shape and form you. Every one of us is being discipled every day. The question is, by what?

If you ignore the spiritual forces of this world, you do not wrestle with what Paul says you ought to wrestle with. That's the word he uses. One translation says: "we wrestle not with flesh and blood." There are other words for a struggle in Greek, but this one is about a close-up confrontation. The struggle is close. We are not dealing with a far-off enemy or a struggle existing somewhere else.

Now, there are others of you who have heard of this struggle and have no problem. In fact, you like it. You come to passages like this and say, "Finally, the war begins! Enough with 'turning the other cheek'. I can't wait to take up arms and get to work." So, you went running and looking for a fight and you grabbed the first weapon you could find. You held out your hand, and the enemy handed it right to you. You waged war on this culture, but you've done it on the enemies' terms. You were worried about winning when you were called to witness. Instead of wrestling with the darkness, you've just mirrored it. You're fighting on the enemy's battlefield and on the enemy's terms – anger, resentment, revenge, sharp words, misguided truths.

Paul clarified this best in 2 Corinthians 10:

“For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

We do not wage war as the world does. Stand as if you are in a spiritual struggle. But also:

2. Stand in the strength that comes from God.

This is the first phrase of verse 10 says: **“Finally, be strong in the Lord and the strength of His might.”** Be clothed in His strength. Take the strength that is from Him. God wants to give you *His* strength.

Already In this letter, Paul has clearly and powerfully proclaimed what is true of us in Christ. He has outlined for them what the “walk” of Christian life is to look like. Finally, he comes to the end of this letter, and he can’t close it out until he tells you how to stand. Literally, he says “Be continuously being clothed with the strength of the Lord.” Verse 13: “Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.”

Stand like there’s a struggle. Stand in the strength God gives. You must also stand as if the tools that God has given you are enough.

3. Stand as if the equipment that God gives is enough.

What are the tools God has given? What are they? It’s a panoply of God that you are encouraged to “put on.” It’s not ill-fitting, plastic armor or a broom on your head. You’ve probably heard a sermon or teaching on this passage with plenty to say about the Romans tools, telling you what each piece would’ve done. I’m focusing on those. I want you to hear about the tools that Paul says you can’t do without. These are tools that help you stand in the strength of God.

Having girded your loins with truth.

Be wrapped in the truth. The first step in a war is to attack what is true. Deceit is a tool to convince or confuse. There is a war on truth in our day. It’s hard to find and hard to come by. It seems it is difficult to speak. Paul says you ought to be wrapped around in what’s true, sincere, and genuine. The words that you speak ought to be unequivocally committed to being true.

We think it's funny or entertaining or more effective to take our words and stretch them to their limits. We take truth and add a little. We applaud those who speak harshly. We enjoy those who stretch our words beyond their meaning. Exaggerated truth is untruth.

Life is a battle for what is true. If you know the truth, the lies of the enemy are worthless. The people of God ought to be known for being wrapped up the truth, that everything is held on by the truth.

Having put on the breastplate of righteousness.

Our world is full of corruption. It seems there is no one left who is righteous. There are so few who can stand in sincerity with virtue as their armor. Consider the supposed strength of three men of Bible: Solomon was noted as the wisest of all men. He seemed to have enormous wealth and power, and yet, beginning with lust he fell to the temptation to serve false gods. Samson was the strongest of all men. He killed 1000 men with the jawbone of a mule. He toppled a temple with his own hands, and yet, as strong as he seemed, he was unable to avoid to his own demise. David was gifted with devotion. He loved the Lord and sought to honor and glorify God. The Psalms record his poetry of adoration. Yet, he fell to the temptation of lust, then adultery, then untruth, and murder.

Their righteousness was not enough, and neither is yours. Here is Paul to say that when your weakness comes, you can have righteousness of Christ, the only one who never sinned. By belief in him, you can take His righteousness so that, when yours falls short, you can be protected by a righteousness that comes from God.

Having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace.

Peace seems so far off. Some are still working to make peace by returning evil for evil. Many assume that peace is just less fighting. We're so far from the *shalom* God longs for us to live in that I'm not sure we'd know its presence if it suddenly came. This we can know: feet fitted with peace are not so you can *take* revenge quickly, but so you can *run from it* with haste.

Taking up the shield of faith.

People of true conviction are hard to find. True fidelity to something requires a commitment that few have the patience for. And yet Paul says, this is a powerful protection from the enemies' aim. In our day, this piece of armor sits alone in the corner. Having ignored the fragile state of a real struggle, we hold instead a faith in ourselves – faith in our resources – faith in our own security. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and have believed."

Take the helmet of salvation.

Adorning your head, salvation is your deliverance. This is the blessed gift of redemption that God gives to all of us. Many today try put on this helmet and *only* a helmet. It makes for poor attire if you wear it all by itself. It ignores the big and beautiful gifts of God in hopes of escaping without the struggle. Spiritually and physically, that's an inappropriate way to go walking around.

The sword of the spirit which is the word of God.

The words of God are defense for the lies of the enemy. When the devil himself offers all that could tempt Jesus, it is the words of God that bring Jesus strength as he defeats evil in the knowledge that “man does not live on bread alone but by the very word of God.”

These are the gifts in which you are called to stand: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Word. This is the stand we are called to take – a stand that is worthy of being image-bearers of God. We are called to stand with these things in a world that doesn’t even know them anymore in a struggle that it ignores but is very much *real*. The body of Christ is called to be adorned in these things as a testimony to the King and the kind of kingdom he brings.

“We are ambassadors for Christ,” Paul says elsewhere. We show the world, by the attributes of our life and the way that we stand, what the world will someday be. Our work and our lives should give a glimpse of the coming city of God.

We proclaim this to a weary world that is tired from a struggle that it has ignored for too long. We stand to say that the power of God and the equipment that he has given us *is still enough*.

Paul writes this letter chained in prison. Do you think he doesn’t understand the realities of life? The trouble or hardship that can come from following Jesus? He sits, we assume, writing or dictating these words with one end of the chain tied to him and the other to a Roman soldier. Day after day he sees that soldiers wardrobe do what it does best and it’s an inspiration for Paul’s words. He looks over at the whole suit and wants to say to us, “God has given you a suit, too! It’s not like his. It’s not made to do what his does. Yours has truth and salvation and peace. It covers you in rightness and faith, puts the words of God in your hand, and it cannot be defeated.”

Paul writes to say that these tools are enough. It still works! It’s still enough.

If you’ve been living this life frustrated by the difficulties you face, the challenges that come, unsure about the future, struggling in a relationship, or mad at the culture or the direction its going, Paul comes to proclaim that *God’s tools are still enough!* His power is still that big. It still works. This is still the armor you need. Don’t put it down. Don’t take the enemy’s tools. Don’t fight the war on the enemy’s terms.

Be clothed in the truth that binds creation together at its core.

It’s the rightness that measures out all that has ever been just.

It’s the perfect peace of the Prince himself.

It’s the very faith that brings assurance.

It’s the salvation of the only one who can truly save.

It’s the word of the same Spirit that hovered over the deep at creation and still speaks today by Spirit and through His word.

These are your gifts! No one else in world has the power of that armor to proclaim the message of the King and His kingdom. Wear it with joy. Walk in it with pride. Stand as if the struggle is real. It's still enough. There is still power in this armor.

It's the kind of power that can make a Roman soldier, adorned in his own armor, look up at a man on a cross whose hands he's just pierced and say, "Truly this was the Son of God."

The world will offer you, today and tomorrow, any number of tools for life and living. You can find other weapons and strategies for waging war. You can even get distracted by other struggles. But hear this word proclaimed today from Ephesians 6: you weren't made for that, and it wasn't made for you. Don't be distracted. Don't be tempted.

So come, lay down the weapons of life that the world teaches you to wield. Receive from Christ the things you need to stand. Proclaim to the world that God's power is still good enough.

You have been outfitted with everything you need for the true war that wages in this world. This equipment for kingdom living is a gift to you from God. There is no one better armed for what tomorrow holds than those who come today to receive from Christ all that they need for victory in His name.

Be clothed in *that* power. Put on continuously the strength of his might. It's still enough.

ⁱ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Bantam Books, 1995) Preface.

ⁱⁱ Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995) 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tim Keller, "Spiritual Warfare," *A Study of Ephesians: Who is the Church?* (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church) sermon from January 9, 2012.

^{iv} Ibid.