

- I. Paul is drawing his letter to a close. It's time for his charge and benediction; to put a nice little bow on everything he's covered, and give his readers something powerful to send them charging out to attack the mission field with passion. This is his moment to galvanize his readers and send the congregation out "to go out there and win one for the Gipper," or encourage them to "be perfect" or remind them "clear eyes, full hearts, can't lose." And Paul kinda-sorta offers this with his armor analogy, but the real heart of his closing remarks to the church in Ephesus was to encourage the congregation to stand firm in the face of adversity.
- II. Paul doesn't sugar coat what is required of those who are willing to travel together in the name of Christ. The road of the Christian is not an easy one to follow, it is beset on all sides by evil trying to constantly move us off course. In Paul's description, the Christian life is not for those who seek prosperity in this life. It is not for those who believe that life will be a cake walk once they enter into a relationship with Christ and the Christian community. Paul is relaying to the church, the honest truth that once you've entered into a relationship with Christ and the church, that is when you will need the armor more than any other.
- III. If the Christian life were easy we wouldn't need the armor, but it is then when you will be tested the most. It is then, when you will require the defensive armor Paul describes here in order to stand firm in the face of evil, in the face of temptation. The evil that gets most of our attention is that which can be easily determined, murder is murder, adultery is adultery, stealing is stealing. These and others are pretty easy to figure out between right and wrong. But where it gets a little tricky, and to me where the armor Paul references comes into play most often, are the instances where the wiles or methods of evil are hidden, whose outcomes may be good, but the ways in which that good was achieved is less than desirable. That is when standing in truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, and proclaiming the gospel of peace with the one another is essential.
- IV. First and foremost, Ephesians is about community. The community that has been brought together in Christ's name. Bridges have built between Jews and Gentiles in this community so they are able to worship together, break bread together, and show the love and grace to one another that is almost unheard of in other areas of their society. If we look at other letters of Paul in the Bible, it is difficult for a number of churches as well. It is no small thing, that Paul lauds this church as an example to others of what it looks like to put away other allegiances, in order to share the label of brother and sister in Christ across varying backgrounds. If we look at the world today, we find it difficult to get along with people we've known all of our lives. We allow other differences to wedge their way between us instead of being the community of believers. Football season is upon us next weekend, and across the southeast the great separation begins. Neighborhood relationships become a little more anxiety ridden, and tense during the

time of year. We think twice about whether or not to invite that Gator fan over to watch the big game or not, knowing that they will come in wearing that unpalatable orange and blue. Or, we go as far as one Georgia fan last year who woke up his Auburn neighbor at 6am the morning after the SEC Championship with a microphone and loud speaker pointed at his neighbor's house to remind him about of what took place the night before.

- V. And while that's humorous, fandom can and does get out of hand rather quickly. The term 'fan' is shorthand for 'fanatic.' In every other instance fanatic is used it is not used in a positive way. When you hear religious fanatic or political fanatic, these are typically individuals who are causing unrest. These are folks who want to disrupt the hard work of community building, who neglect to see the face of God in their fellow humans, who might on occasion disagree with them. And so, for Paul and the church in Ephesus, and for the church today, it is important that we heed his word to stand firm together to face whatever might come. It is difficult for an individual stand firm in the face of overwhelming odds. It is hazardous for a person to stand alone upon hearing a cancer diagnosis, the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, or when temptation lurks to seize control. But a united group is able to link together and strengthen one another. The early church worship together, they studied together, they lived, worked, and played together because they knew that they were forged together in Christ, and while they might disagree over how to get job done, they were brought together by something larger than themselves, that valued the poor and rich, the slave and free, the Jew and Gentile alike.
- VI. But the church is not insulated from sin, evil, and temptation simply because we are the church. Two weeks ago we learned of sexual abuse that had taken place in several diocese of the Catholic Church in Pennsylvania. Over the course of 70 years more than 1000 children were sexually abused, by some 300 priests, and these are only the numbers that could be traced through the priests own record keeping of the encounters. If the actual abuse were not enough in this scathing indictment, we also learned of the extent to which other bishops and leaders within the church covered for these priests moving them from church to church without consequence.<sup>1</sup>
- VII. Folks choose to defend their friends instead of the vulnerable children and parishioners who were entrusted to their care. Again, the church is not immune to evil because it is the church. The church must be more vigilant than any other organization because we are supposed to be the body of Christ in the world. The church must set the example for that which we wish to see the rest of the world replicate.
- VIII. We have had difficulties within our own denomination. A few short years ago it was found that several executives at General Assembly used grant money inappropriately, funneling it towards pet projects.<sup>2</sup> We cannot defend the powers and principalities even

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/14/us/catholic-church-sex-abuse-pennsylvania.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.pcusa.org/news/2015/4/16/presbyterian-mission-agency-board-receives-report-/](https://www.pcusa.org/news/2015/4/16/presbyterian-mission-agency-board-receives-report/)

if they are our friends, neighbors, brothers and sisters in Christ, our adherence to living a life of faithful obedience to Christ must outweigh our commitment to our worldly relationships. Even though the church is called to be the body of Christ in the world, we must understand that it is still made of fallible people; people who sin, who look for the easy way which is not always the best way or God's way of handling a situation.

- IX. The church must embody this armor against all principalities and powers. We must refuse the wiles of evil which would lead us to use methods which stand against the character of God and the life of Christ in order to achieve good. In his book *Practice Resurrection*, Eugene Peterson points out, "Armor is redefined in terms of who we are, not in what we do." In my mind, we are children of the living God. The God who sent himself down to earth to share the story of his love for his creation, to live a life that would serve as an example of what it means to live up to our initial created goodness, whose life was an example of living with an internalized armor of truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and word of God. Peterson goes on to say, "The 'armor of God' has nothing to do with killing or overcoming the opposition by force. With the armor of God internalized, we will not deepen our paranoia by either cowering in fear or demonizing the opposition. Jesus did not use the 'wiles of the devil' to defeat the devil. Neither can we."<sup>3</sup>
- X. Often our reactionary response when faced with evil is to go on the offensive. We want to take the fight to it and root it out at all costs. It is easy to respond to evil with evil, to hate with hate. It is more difficult to share grace, steadfast love, and kindness, and embody the truth, righteousness, peace, faith and salvation offered in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Yet, that is our calling in this world. Jill Duffield writes, "I do not want to pray for my enemies. I do not want to sit at the same table with betrayers. I do not want to go to the cross. I do want to seek reconciliation. I do not want to extend forgiveness. All of this is too difficult. Grace is offensive. Revenge far more satisfying. I want to see some people eating crow and lots of it. But Jesus says: 'I am the bread of life, come down from heaven, for the sake of the world. Not everyone will believe, many will be offended, but for those who eat and drink, they will live, differently, fully, abundantly, and for the sake of the world, too.' Eating this bread from heaven requires that I am what I eat, that I abide in Jesus, that I put on the whole armor of God and take on the cosmic powers of this present darkness, that I offer heavenly bread indiscriminately and eat with anyone and everyone."<sup>4</sup>
- XI. There will be days when we do not want to combat evil with love, there will be days when we find it impossible to do so. But that is why the church is here, so that we might walk together through life, defending one another from the daily arrows and spears that are hurled our way, encouraging one another along our shared journey to continue to shine the light of Christ into the darkness of the world. Herbert Butterfield gives this blunt counsel: "Let us take the devil by the rear, and surprise him with a dose of those

<sup>3</sup> Peterson, Eugene, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ*, p. 263-264

<sup>4</sup> Duffield, Jill, "Looking into the Lectionary," Aug 26, 2018.

gentler virtues that will be poison to him. At least when the world is in extremities, the doctrine of love becomes the ultimate measure of our conduct.”<sup>5</sup> It is not the easy way, or most convenient for us, but it is the result of wearing the armor of God.

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<sup>5</sup> Peterson, Eugene, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ*, p. 265.