

OUR STRUGGLE, *Phil Strong*

Text: Ephesians 6:10-20

July 24, 2016



Teaching notes

I awaken each morning, in this world, to two thoughts: 1) coffee, 2) the hope (illusion) of getting my life “*under control*”; of making life work for me, convinced that #1 is related to #2. I realize that between the two pressing questions of my soul: “*Does God really answer prayer?*” and “*Will he really give me what I ask for?*”, lies this vast expanse of mystery.

Paul “pans out” and provides a broader context for the Christian experience. He fixes us, immediately, in a world of unprovoked blessing, where we are meant to experience the tangible goodness of God and his good intentions for our lives. But, almost before the “*ink dries*”, he acknowledges it to be an antagonistic world, as well.

All of these God-possibilities for life (love, marriage, sex, work, family, money) are being met with resistance from powers which **defy** God, **deface** his good world and seek to **degrade** humanity (lose who God is and who we are).

Paul’s response to all of the Facebook queries I have entertained recently (“*Can’t we all just get along?*”) is a disturbing, yet resounding “No, we cannot.”

Paul suggests that there is something wrong with our world that is far greater than the laundry-list of behaviors that we label as “sins”.

Currently, it’s easy to assume that the real struggle is something political (legislative) or socio-economic (equity), instead of considering that much of what we are experiencing are merely “*symptoms*” of a core abnormality. That is NOT to assume the irrelevance of our faith to help practically address such issues, but simply to recognize that there are “*bigger*” issues which will limit the scope of our purely rational efforts.

Paul’s list of enemies looks different than mine. He refers to them as “*rulers*”, “*principalities*”, “*authorities*”, “*cosmic powers*”, “*spiritual forces of evil*.” We can’t be content with simply having identified the enemies, then go back to the “*real world*” of grocery lists and soccer games and budgets and Pokémon Go!

Independent of any attempt to solidify my theology of evil’s existence or the presence of Satan, there **he** is; there **it** is, in the garden, *right in the middle* of everything that is God-inspired and thoughtful and beautiful and functional. The suggestion (the scheme), so subtle and so devastating: “*Did God really say...?*”

I can't help but notice throughout the biblical narrative some disturbing tendencies inherent in humanity...

- this 'puzzling' capacity which allows us to look squarely into truth (reality) and choose to believe something else. **We tend toward "self-deception"**.

We can't walk from the couch to the kitchen for another "*fudgsicle*" without being 'winded', but we're not ready to admit that we might be out of shape. We give an inordinate amount of time to our careers, convincing ourselves that we're just 'dedicated', when we're really desperate for validation.

- eventually, our stubbornness results in 'delusion' so pervasive that we can no longer recognize the severity of our situation and we become deaf to the warnings. We become unresponsive to truth. It's why your logical appeals don't faze those you love who persist in self-deceptive, self-destructive behaviors. **We tend toward "self-preservation"**.
- then, having experienced the inevitable consequences of our decisions, we project ourselves as the '*victims*', crying out for help, with no sense of personal responsibility and no real determination to adopt a new way of life. We don't easily abandon our old attachments and habits. We have too much time, energy and resources invested. **We tend toward "self-destruction"**.

Humanity, Paul says, "*exchanged the truth of God for a lie*" [Romans 1] ("*the lie*": definite article in original manuscripts: seminal moment). "**The Fall**", as we identify it, was not simply one-really-bad-choice, but our response to a suggestion that we could find a better life independent of God.

We don't typically respond to "reality", but our own "version" of reality.

We all direct our lives according to what we believe to be true about who we are and the way life was meant to work. When this understanding is skewed, it inevitably distorts and alters our experience of reality. It's *deception* that causes a person who seems wildly successful in their public life to sit alone in their home at night drinking themselves into a stupor. It's a faulty narrative that allows a 75 lb. girl to gag herself every time she eats because she assumes she's too fat.

Deception provides us with an almost limitless array of options for satisfying ourselves apart from God, each seemingly tailored to our own appetites and weaknesses.

We will neither understand our deepest desires nor our deepest issues until the Spirit of God exposes them both. Until then, we'll assume that the answer to our loneliness is a date. We'll assume that our real issue is porn and not a disorderly heart.

I think the best strategy for spiritual warfare is not calling out demons and over-publicizing the Satan, but the life well-lived.

It is the good that overcomes evil, not by ignoring it or renouncing it, but by confronting it with tangible expressions of the goodness of God [Romans 12:21] For example, overcoming the disorder of fractured relationships through the goodness of forgiveness and reconciliation, overcoming the evil of bigotry and xenophobia by the goodness of compassionate interaction.

The **pieces of armor** listed are all personal expressions of God and the kinds of qualities that we exhibit as our lives are being informed and formed by him. It is about “clothing yourself with Jesus” (Romans 13:14). **It involves:**

■ **Living truthfully:**

If Jesus IS truth, any area of our life that isn't aligned with what he desires or anticipates, will never result in the freedom that truth was meant to provide.

The blessedness we experience comes by our willingness to realign ourselves with God's desires and the way he created us to function (e.g. you haven't experienced eternal life until you have 'forgiven'; until you have 'shown mercy'; you don't stop 'worrying about your life' until you trust him for provision). Jesus identifies those who are living truthfully as those who *“listen to my teaching and follow it...”* (Matthew 7).

■ **Living righteously:**

Righteousness has never been merely a compliance issue, but a love issue. It is about faithfulness to a relationship. It's why the armor starts with “truth” and not “righteousness”. I am not responsible for securing my own righteousness, but simply living as if it's true!

Righteousness provides a certain confidence as we see our lives coming together. What we profess to believe supporting the beliefs we portray in our lifestyle.

■ **Living peacefully:**

In order to be good news, it must first invite me to confront the bad news. It must scream of God's relentless love and his determination to free us from the confinement of our own sin and brokenness and empower us, by his lingering Spirit, to walk out into the world of blessing awaiting us.

■ **Living faithfully:**

We are called upon to be Jesus-centered community, engaging our culture for God; calling it to 'glory'--- something other, something bigger.

It's simply not enough for us to denounce the way things are if we don't have anything better to offer; not just as good advice, but as a portrayal of the way that life was meant to be lived... with God and with each other in shame-free, guilt-free, “gluten-free” ☺ community.

I have to place my trust in a God who, historically, has made good on his promises and await the fulfillment of others, with some measure of tenacity and courage. To cling to that belief is either the ultimate delusion or the consummate act of faith. Only time will tell.

■ **Living restoratively [salvation]:**

As long as your remedy for life is another self-imposed strategy, the gospel will seem foolish (1 Corinthians 1:18). As long as what's wrong with us can be reduced to some personal inadequacy, we will remain committed to our own "self-diagnosis" and personalized therapy (e.g. look up your symptoms; establish a diagnosis; create your own remedial course of action)

The truth is, I have no idea what's really going on inside of me and I certainly have no clue as to how to go about addressing it in and of my own ingenuity and intellect. "*Who can save me?*", Paul queries (Romans 7).

■ **Living authoritatively [Word]:**

authority--- "*meaningful grounds for action*". It actually creates the boundaries within which we function.

No matter how dead you sometimes feel, you are alive to God. Both the life that your heart desires and the resources needed to realize it are already resident in you. They may be lying "dormant", but they are ready to be awakened!

"His divine power has given us everything that we need for life (animated by God) and godliness (responding well to God)..." 2 Peter 1:3-4. New heart, new desires, new affections, new empowerment to choose, new life.

■ **Living prayerfully:**

Prayer, in and of itself, is never a substitute for any of the other provisions. They are all appropriated within the context of prayer, never apart from prayer.

Success in living into the life of blessing and realizing some form of victory over the powers, is found not in the human will--- acting on its own--- nor in relinquishing everything to the divine will, but in the human will responding in collaboration with the divine will.

Paul loves to rehearse the paradox of the cross: "*... he stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the cross and marched them naked through the streets*" (Colossians 2:15, Message).

Jesus used the language of cosmic conflict to describe his own mission. 1 John 3:8 "*The reason that the son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil...*"

If Jesus really is the Messiah, the one through whom the good Creator-God would deal with evil and the disorder it has caused and set the world right, this would have to be considered "good news" for anyone hearing the message and feeling somehow constrained by all that is disorderly and deceptive in their lives.

It means that the powers have no more right over you. They are reduced to “deceptive strategies”. They are limited to the permission and the space you provide them. You are now free from the “powers” to follow Jesus into a new way of being human; a new way of relating and functioning.

Every time that truth exposes the lie, grace is available to turn what should be a condemning rebuke into a healing embrace. We see ourselves. We see God. We see God seeing us... and we are transformed by love.

The more I know God, the more I know myself. The more I know myself, the deeper my sense of frustration and fatigue. The deeper my sense of brokenness, the more profound and inviting the gospel becomes. The more responsive I become to the gospel, the more I love God *wholly*, the more I love myself *rightly* and the more I love you *compassionately*.