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HOW TO FIGHT FOR GOD

Ephesians 6:18-20

By

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Ephesians Lesson 62

How to Fight for God Ephesians 6:18-20

During World War Two, an officer was briefing his men on how to take a certain objective. He demonstrated to them the manner in which they needed to hug the ground so as to stay below enemy fire. He said in conclusion, "If you advance on your knees, you will always be safe."

That's what Paul tells us in our text. In 6:10-13, Paul gave us the *explanation for the fight*: we must be strong in the Lord because we are engaged in a spiritual battle with the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. In 6:14-17, Paul told us the *equipment for the fight*: the full armor of God, which enables us to stand firm against this powerful enemy. He mentioned the belt of truth; the breastplate of righteousness; the boots of the preparation 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 (6:18-20), Paul describes the *effecting of the fight*, that is, *how* to fight the enemy, namely,

We fight for God against the enemy through prayer.

I confess that prayer is one of the most difficult topics for me to preach about because it is a difficult subject for me to understand and practice. On the one hand, I know that the only reason God has enabled me to persevere as a pastor for almost 32 years now is His grace that has come to me through the prayers of His people and through my own desperate cries to Him for help. Not a week goes by without my feeling overwhelmingly inadequate for this ministry. I could not endure without prayer.

Yet on the other hand, the longer I am a Christian, the more acutely I am aware of my own shortcomings in prayer. I read great men of God like Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*The Christian Soldier* [Baker], p. 342), who says that prayer should be a *delight* for the believer. But I honestly find prayer to be increasingly difficult and somewhat frustrating. I seem to receive more negative answers to my prayers than positive ones. Lloyd-Jones says that we should devote *much time* to prayer, but I honestly find it very difficult to pray for long

periods of time. I run out of things to say. I share this because I don't want you to think as I preach on prayer that I've got it all together. I'm a fellow struggler with you in this battle. So I'm preaching this message to myself first of all.

Paul uses the word *all* four times in verse 18. In addition, he tells us that we are to pray "in the Spirit." These five points will be our outline. The final *all* is that we should pray "for all the saints." Verses 19-20 specifically apply this, as Paul asks for prayer for himself, that he would be bold and faithful in proclaiming the gospel.

1. Fight for God by praying with all kinds of prayer.

Verse 18 is strictly speaking not a command, but two participles, *praying* and *staying alert*, which are dependent on the imperative *stand* at the beginning of verse 14 (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans], p. 411). So the idea is, "Stand firm by praying and by staying alert."

Paul often links the two words translated *prayer* and *petition*. For example, in Philippians 4:6 he writes, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (*Supplication* translates the same Greek word behind *petition*. Also, see 1 Timothy 2:1, where *entreaties* translates the same Greek word.) It is difficult to draw any clear distinction between the words, except to say that *prayer* is perhaps the more general word, whereas *petition* may refer to prayer for particular benefits (R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* [Eerdmans], p. 189). In our text, the effect of Paul's piling up these synonyms for prayer (*petition* is repeated twice), along with the participle, *praying*, is to emphasize the priority of prayer in spiritual warfare and perhaps also the fact that there are different kinds of prayer that we are to use in the battle.

The Lord's Prayer gives us a helpful outline of different kinds of prayer. "Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name" (Matt. 6:9), points us toward worship as we pray for God's glory. "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10) points to prayer for missions, evangelism, and discipleship. "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11), is prayer for our personal needs. "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12), is confession of sins and prayer for

our relationships. "Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Matt. 6:13) is prayer for holiness, both for others and for ourselves. The prayers in the Psalms and in other Scriptures may give us other types of prayer. But Paul's point is that we fight for God against the enemy as we use all types of prayer.

2. Fight for God by praying at all times.

You may be thinking, "Come on, Paul, be realistic! I have to make a living! I have to go to school! How can I pray *at all times?*"

The phrase is literally, "at every opportunity." It's the same idea as 1 Thessalonians 5:17, "Pray without ceasing." The Greek word translated *without ceasing* was used of a hacking cough and of repeated military assaults. Someone with a hacking cough does not cough every second, but rather he coughs repeatedly and often. He never goes very long without coughing. In the case of repeated military assaults, the army makes an assault then regroups and attacks again and again until it conquers the city. In the same way, we should pray often and repeatedly until we gain the thing for which we are praying.

John MacArthur explains (*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Ephesians* [Moody Press], p. 380),

To obey this exhortation means that, when we are tempted, we hold the temptation before God and ask for His help. When we experience something good and beautiful, we immediately thank the Lord for it. When we see evil around us, we pray that God will make it right and be willing to be used of Him to that end. When we meet someone who does not know Christ, we pray for God to draw that person to Himself and to use us to be a faithful witness. When we encounter trouble, we turn to God as our Deliverer. In other words, our life becomes a continually ascending prayer, a perpetual communing with our heavenly Father.

That last sentence, that our life is to be a perpetual communing with God, is vital. Prayer isn't just rushing into God's presence as if you were rushing into the bank to get some needed funds and then not going back until you needed more. Prayer is going into the bank many times throughout the day because you're in love with the banker. You enjoy talking with him.

Also, when we're in need, prayer is not to be our *last* resort: "We've done all that we can do! Now, all we can do is pray!" John Bunyan said (source unknown), "You can do more than pray *after* you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray *until* you have prayed." Prayer should be the first thing that we think to do when we're aware of a need.

Prayer is not a mere formality to say before a meal or to open a meeting. It's the way that we acknowledge our need and dependence on God and lay hold of His promises. As John Calvin wrote (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster Press], edited by John McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, 3:20:2), "It is, therefore, by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father." Or, to cite Bunyan again (*The Works of John Bunyan* [Baker], 1:65), "Pray often, for prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge for Satan." Pray with all prayer and petition, at all times.

3. Fight for God by praying in the Spirit.

What does it mean to "pray in the Spirit" (see also, Jude 20)? First, we need to clarify what it does *not* mean:

- A. Praying in the Spirit does not refer to praying in tongues or to praying emotionally.

The early church experienced the gift of speaking and praying in tongues (1 Cor. 14:14). While there is debate about whether that gift is still given, I am convinced that most of what goes under that banner today is illegitimate. Genuine speaking or praying in tongues is to speak or pray in a translatable foreign language, not to speak or pray in nonsense syllables. (See my sermon, "Testing Tongues," on the church web site.) That criterion alone eliminates most of what is claimed to be tongues today. But in our text, Paul is talking about making definite petitions to God, not praying in an unknown tongue.

Also, while it is right to involve our emotions in prayer as we sense our desperate need, this is not what Paul means by praying in the Spirit. It is possible to pray emotionally in the Holy Spirit or to pray calmly in the Spirit. It is also possible to pray emotionally in the flesh, getting all worked up for reasons far removed from the Holy Spirit. So, what does it mean to pray in the Spirit?

B. Praying in the Spirit is to pray in dependence on the Spirit, in accordance with God's Word.

Three comments on praying in the Spirit:

(1) I cannot pray in the Spirit if I have unconfessed sin in my life.

Psalm 66:18 states, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear." If I think that I can come before God's holy throne in the power of His Holy Spirit, while at the same time holding on to sin in my life, I am greatly deceived. That's why Peter tells husbands that if they do not treat their wives properly, honoring them as fellow heirs of the grace of life, their prayers will be hindered (1 Pet. 3:7).

God knows our hearts. We can't play games, thinking that we can disobey Him and then come and sweet talk Him into giving us what we want. You can't pray in the Spirit, "Lord, bless my business," while you're being dishonest and corrupt. You can't pray, "Lord, bless my family," while you're secretly enslaved to pornography. You've got to repent of all known sin and do the deeds appropriate to repentance before you can pray in the Holy Spirit.

(2) Praying in the Spirit is to pray according to God's will as revealed in His Word.

Paul has just told us to take "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (6:17). God's written Word reveals to us His moral will for our lives (1 Thess. 4:3) and His eternal will of summing up everything in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:9-10). The Spirit will never lead us to pray contrary to the will of God as revealed in the Word of God. You cannot pray in the Spirit, "Lord, bless me as I enter into marriage with this unbeliever."

One way of praying in the Spirit is to use the prayers in Scripture to direct your own requests. We've studied two of Paul's prayers in Ephesians (Eph. 1:15-23; 3:14-21). There are many other prayers in the Bible. In addition, all of God's commandments in Scripture should be turned into prayer for holiness in the lives of God's people, including your own life. To pray in the Spirit is to pray according to God's revealed will in His Word.

- (3) Praying in the Spirit is to pray in dependence on the Spirit, under His direction and power.

Although it doesn't happen very often, I have had times where I was struggling to pray, finding it difficult to concentrate, and not sensing the Lord's presence. Then, suddenly the Spirit prompts me to pray something and He directs my thoughts and words, giving me power and freedom in prayer that I was lacking moments before. The Spirit is moving me along in prayer that originates with Him.

Also, at times the Spirit puts the same request on my heart frequently and with an intensity that I formerly lacked. Maybe it's on my prayer list and I mechanically went through the list. But then one item comes home to me with unusual force. I believe that this is, in part, what it means to pray in the Spirit. We should keep praying, even when we don't feel this unction of the Spirit. But we also should ask the Spirit for His direction and power as we pray.

So, fight for God by praying with all kinds of prayer, at all times, and in the Spirit.

4. Fight for God by praying alertly with all perseverance.

- A. Pray alertly!

As I said, the word in Greek is a participle, which is dependent on the command, "Stand firm" (6:14). Paul is saying, "Stand firm against the enemy by being alert to persevere and pray for all the saints." The word means to be awake and vigilant. Jesus told the disciples in the garden (Matt. 26:41), "Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." As you know, they promptly went to sleep! But before I condemn them, I've got to admit that I've often done the same!

This word, *be alert*, ties in with the military analogy. You're a sentry on duty. You must watch for any signs of infiltration by the enemy and go immediately to prayer. Do you see a person who is suffering? Pray that Satan might not get their eyes off the Lord and devour them in their trial (1 Pet. 5:8-9). Do you see someone who is depressed or discouraged? Pray that she will put her trust in God and His salvation. Do you see a husband and wife who are having

conflict? Pray! Do you hear of church members at odds with one another? Be alert and pray!

B. Pray perseveringly.

This is one of the aspects of prayer that I find most difficult. We are to pray with “all perseverance.” Jesus told the parable of the widow who kept pestering the hardhearted judge, until finally he relented just to get her off his back. Jesus assures us that God is not uncaring like that unrighteous judge, but He will bring about justice speedily for His elect who cry out to Him. Jesus’ reason for telling that parable was, “to show that at all times [we] ought to pray and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

And yet, Paul’s word about perseverance, not to mention our experience, shows that Jesus’ promise of God answering speedily must be interpreted by *God’s* view of time, not ours. The verb form of this Greek word translated *perseverance* is often linked with prayer (Acts 1:14; 2:42; 6:4; Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2). It means to devote yourself constantly to it. You don’t give up when you don’t see immediate results. You wait on the Lord (Ps. 27:14).

I can’t give you a rule for when to go on praying and when to conclude that God isn’t going to answer. I have prayed for one request for over 35 years now, and at least part of my request cannot be answered now. So, I modified the request and keep praying. I have scratched some people off my prayer list after years of praying with no visible results. If God brings them to mind, I’ll pray, but I don’t pray for them regularly anymore. When I do stop praying for someone, it’s not because I doubt God’s ability to answer. Rather, after years of praying, it just seems that God is not going to answer and so I leave it with Him and His sovereign will.

So, we fight for God by praying with all kinds of prayer, at all times, in the Spirit, and by praying alertly with perseverance. Lastly,

5. Fight for God by praying for all the saints.

A. Pray for all the saints because they are your fellow soldiers.

If you’re on the battlefield and your fellow soldiers get shot, you’re in big trouble! The point is, we’re not Christians in isolation, but in fellowship with the entire church. As Paul has emphasized in

Ephesians, we are one body in Christ. If one member hurts, the whole body hurts. Also, praying for your fellow soldiers in the battle will motivate you to love them and work out any relational conflicts. It's difficult to pray for someone and still be at odds with him. Pick up a church directory and work your way through it, praying for each person. Even if you don't know the people, if you meet them there will be an instant connection, because you've been praying for them. Or, you can call and say, "I'm praying for you. Do you have any special requests? Could we arrange to meet at church this Sunday?"

B. Pray especially for those on the front lines of ministry.

Paul asks for prayer for himself, that he will "make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel" (6:19-20). He is asking for prayer that he would have opportunities to proclaim the gospel and the boldness and liberty to make it plain. Every Christian is in the ministry, but evangelists, missionaries, pastors, and other Christian leaders are especially targets for the enemy. If Satan can bring down a leader, he scores big time!

The phrase, "the mystery of the gospel," does not mean that it is a hidden secret, but rather that it is divinely revealed truth. It is not logical truth that anyone can deduce on his own. Rather, God must open blind eyes to see "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4-6). So Paul asked for prayer for boldness as he proclaimed this revealed mystery.

When you read through the Book of Acts, you don't get the impression that Paul was lacking in boldness! In fact, he was in prison because he had boldly proclaimed the gospel to a mob that had attempted to kill him! When you read what he had endured for the sake of the gospel, it seems that nothing could stop him (2 Cor. 11:23-29). So why was he asking prayer for boldness in witness?

There may be two reasons. First, Paul was not a strong, naturally gifted communicator. The Corinthians had said of him, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech is contemptible" (2 Cor. 10:10). He says that he was with them "in weakness and in fear and in much trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3). He knew that he was inadequate in himself, so he needed prayer for boldness (2 Cor. 3:5).

Second, Paul was about to go before Caesar, who would either acquit or condemn him. There would be the strong temptation to be diplomatic and to avoid talking to Caesar about his need for repentance from his sin in order to receive God's forgiveness in Christ. Perhaps Satan tempted Paul with the thought, "Think of how many more you could reach if you get out of prison! Just play it safe when you go before Caesar and you'll have your freedom." But Paul wanted to proclaim the gospel boldly and clearly to Caesar. So he asked for prayer.

Pray for missionaries, evangelists, pastors, and Christian leaders to be fearless and uncompromising when it comes to the gospel. Pray for me! Spurgeon was once asked the secret of his great success. Although I'm sure we could identify many other factors, he replied simply, "My people pray for me."

- C. Pray for yourself, that you would be bold and clear in your witness for Christ.

It's amazing that Paul did not ask for prayer that he would be released from prison or for prayer for his health needs. Rather, he asked for prayer that he would proclaim the gospel boldly and not miss any opportunities. While it's all right to pray for your personal needs, Paul's example here, as well as the Lord's Prayer, teach us that our primary focus in prayer should be furthering the kingdom of God, not making ourselves more comfortable. So make Paul's passion your passion, to pray that you will be used to proclaim the gospel to the lost with clarity and boldness.

Conclusion

John MacArthur observes (*ibid.*, p. 378), "Ephesians begins by lifting us up to the heavenlies, and ends by pulling us down to our knees." Remember, the Christian life is not about making yourself happy and comfortable. It's a battle with the unseen forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. To fight for God against this evil enemy, we must be people of prayer! We will only advance safely on our knees!

Application Questions

1. What is your biggest hindrance to faithful prayer? What can you do to remove it?
2. Is praying "in the Spirit" opposed to having an organized, systematic approach to prayer (a list)? Why/why not?
3. How can we know whether to keep on praying or to conclude that God's answer is "no"?
4. How bold should we be in bearing witness for Christ? Where is the balance between sensitivity and boldness (Col. 4:6)?

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