

## Taking it to the Mat

Message #2 in the series "Finding Victory in a No-Win World"

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown  
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Well, grace and peace to you in the name of God, our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ. It's my joy today to share with you the word of God. You know, last week we began a brand-new sermon series for the startup of this new 2022. And that sermon series were called Finding Victory in a No-Win World. It's a study of just ten verses in Chapter 6 of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It's in our New Testament. Would love for you to follow along. Just as a reminder, last week we focused in on just a couple of verses, verses 10 and 11. Let me remind you what that said. Finally, it says in verse 10,

**"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 wiles of the devil."  
[Ephesians 6:10-11 NIV].**

I just love that word wiles we don't use that language anymore. But basically, it means that when we're fighting in this spiritual battle with the enemy, Satan, that there are certain strategies and we looked at those strategies that the enemy, Satan, applies for trying to undermine the work of God, he says followers. Now we looked very specifically that Satan tends to attack us in the area of our weakness. You know, we all have weaknesses and so there's quite real clear evidence that Satan goes after those weaknesses. Well, he also goes after the areas of our strengths. Why? Because that often is a source, or a potential source of pride and Satan goes after pride. It's one of the easiest ways he can use to undermine whatever God is birthing in us, or it undermine our growth in our own discipleship.

We also learned last week that Satan often attacks what or who is important to us. You know, we may say, "Hey, I'm good. I'm solid in my relationship with God." And so, Satan knows that there are individuals or issues that are really important or vital to us. And so, he may go after them to try to get to us. It's a real, very, very specific and very mean tactic. Also, we learned that Satan tries to divide and conquer. You know why? Because if he can divide us, if he can isolate us from others, then we're less of a threat. We are a greater threat to the enemy when we're united. And finally, at least last week we looked at one of Satan's strategies is to distract us. If we're on a path of building on our relationship with God and for example, we decide we're going to get up at five o'clock in the morning every morning and we're going to have our devotion time. And five o'clock, the alarm goes off then and immediately things start happening that pull us away from our path with the Lord. That distraction can be a strategy of the enemy to try to take us off course in building our relationship with the Lord.

So those strategies really are effective more and more in today's world. I really believe that we are living in what I have called, and others have called a no-win world or no-win scenarios. And last week we found out that for followers of Jesus, no-win scenarios are actually tests of character and faith. They actually may be a sign that God is about to birth something new in your life or when it happens to the church, it may be that God is about to

birth something new in the church. And so, we're put into situations where we have tension in values, where no matter what we choose, somebody is going to lose something. It's a no-win scenario. But also, what we learned last week is that as followers of Jesus, no-win scenarios are possibly a sign that we are becoming a greater threat to the enemy. That Satan is seeing us as a greater threat, which may be why he is putting us into those no-win scenarios. So, we're going to take this one step further today and as we prepare, would you join with me as we go before the Lord in prayer? Let's pray together.

*Father God, open us up to your word and open your word up to us. Teach us what You would have us learn Lord, as You open us to the greater gifts that we need for the sake of the war that we are facing. Lord because we are dealing with spiritual warfare in our conversation. I pray that You would equip us with the Holy Spirit's presence to block out all those distractions that the enemy would use to threaten to pull us away from our relationship with You. So, keep us focused in on You, Lord, as we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

So, let's jump back into Paul's letter to the Ephesians Chapter 6, and we're going to pick up at verse 12. Let's listen together. As God speaks to us, this is what it says,

**"For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore..." [Ephesians 6:12-14 NRSV].**

This is the word of the Lord; thanks be to God. So, there are a couple of things that I want to pull out of this passage of scripture. You know, I'm a lover of words, as you know. So, let's go into the verse that starts this reading verse 12 and look with me at one specific word to begin our conversation. Notice that Paul uses the word OUR, "for our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Notice that that word OUR is plural. You know, that means that every one of us needs to know how to respond when the battle comes our way. We need to exercise those muscles of our spiritual faith because when we make intentional choices to grow in our relationship with God, the enemy will increase his attacks on us. So, we are better together, we are more powerful together. Our greatest strength is our unity. This is so important for us. We must not face these battles alone. The critical factor for all of us is to remind ourselves that we are part of a family, the family of God, and therefore we cannot isolate ourselves from that family. It is so critically important for us to remain connected, to remain united.

Now, please note, I know that not all of us will agree on all things. So, unity is not about uniformity. We're not going to agree on all things. In fact, you know, you've heard me this multiple times. I'm a firm believer that whenever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, there's bound to be a fight. That's the reality of being in the human condition. However, within our diversity, no matter how much we disagree in principle or issue with one another, no matter how many times our personalities may clash, the truth of being a follower of Jesus, means that we must remain united with one another in love. We're sisters and brothers, we're a family. Families sometimes fight, but we are still family, so we need to be

consistent in our oneness. Why? Because our witness depends on our oneness. We learned that just last year.

Our unity tells a story. It also gives us strength. Let's go back to the verse. Notice also that Paul uses the word STRUGGLE, at least in this translation. "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh." That word is a very interesting word in the Greek, the original language of the New Testament. So, the word struggle actually is a very unique word, so unique that it only appears one time in the entire New Testament, and it literally is translated as wrestling. Yeah, that's very right. So, that got me thinking when I was preparing this message. I'm not a wrestler other than what we used to do as kids with my brothers, and that was not the sport, that was a totally different objective. But there is a clear objective when we talk about wrestling as a sport. You know what the object of wrestling is? The object of wrestling in one simple phrase is to put your opponent on their back, to pin them, to put them on their back. Now when you look at wrestling and I did some research because, as I said, I'm not a wrestler.

When you wrestle that objective of putting your opponent on their back is only one way that you can win that game. It's a very important way. But there are other ways to win at wrestling. And namely, in addition to the pin, you get the most points of the match. And so, you can score points in wrestling in unique ways. What I found out is that you can score two points for the takedown, that's the pin, but you can also score a point for escaping a takedown. You can escape a hold and score a point. You can also, there's a point called a reversal where you know somebody may have you in a hold and you end up being the one who's holding. And then there's the near fall where you take your opponent almost to the floor and you keep them there for maybe two to three seconds - you get two or three points.

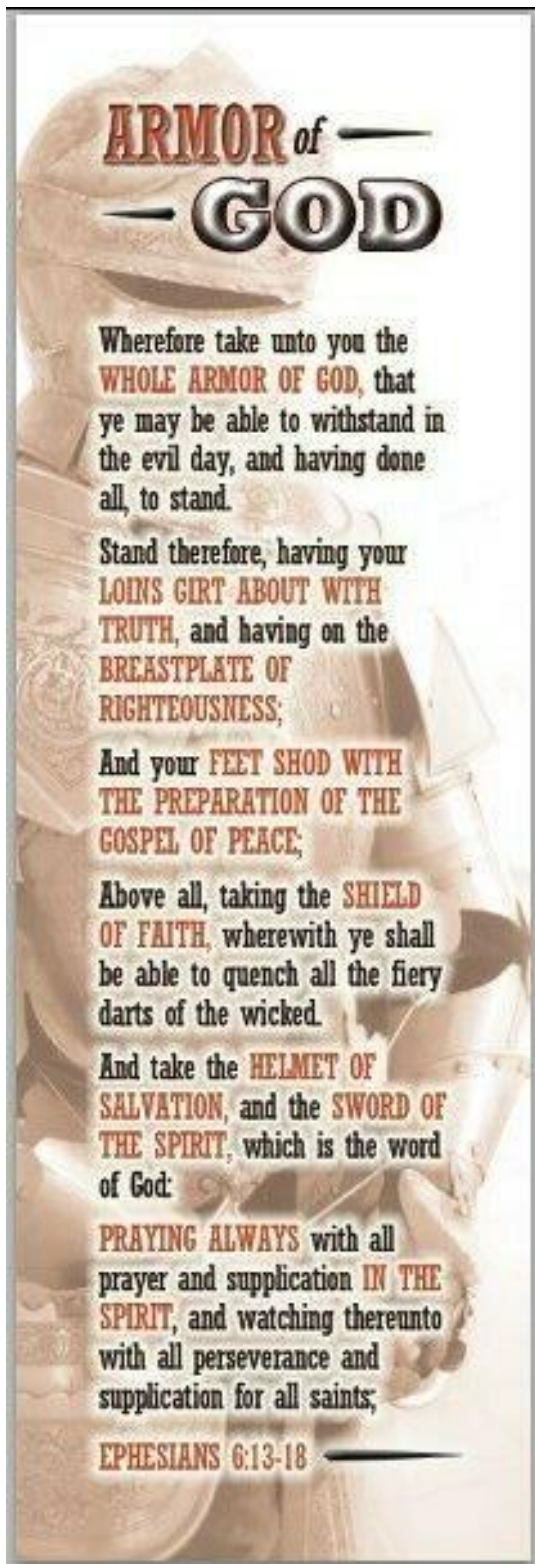
And then there's also penalty points. Penalty points are interesting that got me on to a kind of a different track. There are very specific types of penalties in wrestling, like there's illegal holds. There are technical violations like stepping off the mat. There's when you grab clothing or you grab the mat or you grab somebody's headgear, or there's also a penalty when you lock your hands. Now there's some locked hands and positions that are acceptable, and there are some that are not acceptable. When you do the unacceptable locking of hands, and you get a penalty. Then there's penalties for unnecessary roughness or unsportsmanlike conduct or flagrant misconduct. There's also a penalty for stalling the match and false starts.

So, here's the deal when we apply all of those principles to what the Apostle Paul is getting at, we need to be very clear about something, namely, our enemy, Satan, our enemy does not play by the rules. Our enemy does not play by the rules. So, before I unpack that statement, let me go a little bit further in the verse because I think this is important. Paul says in verse 12,

**"For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."  
[Ephesians 6:12 NRSV].**

I know that that language is very unique and somewhat weird for those of us who are living in 21st Century America and that language is kind of foreign to our modern way of thinking

about life, but it's really critical. So, it's also very important for us to realize that when we hear those words rulers and authorities and cosmic powers, we're not talking about world systems and governments and institutions. The Apostle Paul was not using that language



that way. The people in first century Ephesus, they would have heard those words and within their culture, they would have known exactly what the Apostle Paul was talking about. They would have interpreted these words as evil spirits and that's really very critical for us. Most of us kind of get freaked out about evil spirits. But Paul and Jesus and many of the other apostles and many of the other believers in that day, this was their reality. They saw evil at work. In fact, many of my missionary friends and perhaps even some of yours, they see evil in other parts of the world, and we see the evidence of evil and evil spirits here. We just try to explain it differently. For those disciples in the first century, especially in Ephesus and for my missionary friends who are disciples in other parts of the world, this language is what they're used to, and they would confirm that they are facing a battle with evil, tangible evil. One more phrase and this verse that's important. Notice that Paul uses the phrase, "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Now I want to be clear that that the Apostle Paul, even though he is writing to a very Greek minded culture, which means that they thought of things kind of the way Plato and Aristotle thought of things that, you know, there were good things and bad things that matter. Bodies and physicality were evil, and spiritual was good. The Apostle Paul is not making that dualistic perspective part of his context. He's speaking into that culture, but he's basically saying to us in that phrase, that there is a spiritual reality that is coexisting with our physical human reality and that the true battle that's ongoing is going on consistently and currently in the midst of that spiritual reality. We're not talking about heaven as a place, necessarily. We're talking about the domain of God, the domain of the spiritual world.

Now, from that vantage point, the heavenly places can just simply be defined as the spiritual realm. So, in other words, Paul is saying that there's a battle going on that involves spiritual forces of evil within that spiritual realm. OK, so let me pull all of this together and in basic language what the Apostle Paul is telling us is that in this wrestling match that we are engaging with the

enemy on, these demonic forces that we will engage will use non-rule based temptation, accusation, doubt, lies, oppression and even the positive accolades, flattery, false honor and many other tools in order to deceive and invalidate you and me, the believer. These demonic forces will use whatever it takes to undermine what God is doing and to get us off

our path of building our strength in our relationship with the Lord. The enemy will do whatever it takes to win. But here's the thing, remember, the battle is already won by Jesus. Satan wants to convince us that it isn't. Satan wants to convince us to give away our strength by giving away our identity in Christ. But Paul, in verses 13 and 14, this is what he says,

**"Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore..." [Ephesians 6:13-14 NRSV].**

Well, first noticed the word, therefore it occurs twice in this English translation. Therefore, what's it there for? Everything that Paul had been saying. You know, basically he's saying Satan is going to do whatever it takes. He doesn't play by the rules. So therefore, take up the whole armor of God so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day. And having done everything to stand firm. OK, so the second word that repeats itself in these couple of verses is the word stand. It comes embedded in the word withstand. Withstand on that evil day and having done everything to stand firm. Stand therefore, Paul says. Well, stand in Greek is actually a military term. In other words, Paul is using a word that basically is translated as "Stand your ground."

In other words, what Paul is saying to us, "Don't give up your identity in Christ. Don't give Satan any part of your life." Wow. Why is this important to us? You see every opportunity Satan tries to use to defeat us, hear this, God can use to turn around the situation. Every opportunity that Satan tries to use to defeat us, God can use to turn around the situation. How many times do we hear in scripture, Old and New Testament alike, the equivalent of what the enemy meant for evil, God used for good?

So let me wind this down and start applying it. Friends, it's important for us to realize something that in this grand wrestling match with Satan, you and I, we will not defeat Satan or his demonic team. What? David, you've just been saying to stand. Yeah, go with me. Just hang in there. You and I, we will not defeat Satan or his demonic team. Why not? Satan has been around a lot longer than you and me. The demonic, they know every tactic. They have studied humanity. They have studied believers. They have studied the followers of Jesus for a long time. There is nothing that you or I, on our own can do, to defeat that enemy. But here's the thing. We don't have to. Jesus already did. We don't have to defeat Satan. Jesus already did. So, what that means is that the power and authority of Jesus Christ, in Jesus' victory over the enemy is now residential in potential within each and every one of us as followers. We stand, especially together, with the authority of children of Almighty God, adopted sons and daughters, co-heirs with Jesus Christ, so we do not fight on this mat, this wrestling match alone. In fact, we don't have to fight it at all. The battle is already won, but what we do have to do is we have to claim the authority that is rightfully ours in Jesus Christ. We need to remind ourselves who we are in Christ and that authority that we have in Jesus Christ that is what battles on the mat with the enemy.

So, I have a question for us. Hear me. What's your wrestling mat right now? Where is that battle going on? And who is on the mat with you? Is your wrestling taking place within your family, within your marriage, within your own personal relationship with the Lord? Is that wrestling going on in your workplace and in your school, in your neighborhood? What's the mat on which that wrestling is taking place? Where is it that you feel the attack of the enemy? Who will you ask to stand with you? Notice I said, stand in the grand wrestling

match Jesus has already won. Satan doesn't play fair. So, he's trying to convince you to get into the fight, but Jesus has already won. Our greatest weapon in spiritual warfare is reminding ourselves who we are in Jesus Christ and taking that authority in Christ with us.

So, I want to invite you to do something. It may sound weird, but you know me, I'm weird. So, trust me, whatever that mat is for you, I invite you to go to that place, whether it's an actual place in your home or maybe it's a metaphor for that, mat, go to that place, stand in the midst of it all and claim that territory for Jesus Christ. You know, I do this all the time. Most of you don't know this, but I often go into each of our sanctuaries at St. Paul's Church and I touch every pew and every seat and every door, and I pray. And this is what I pray, "Lord, I claim this territory for Jesus Christ. I claim the people of this congregation for Jesus Christ. Lord, I push back by the authority of Jesus Christ. I push back the attacks of the enemy. Lord, remind us of who we are. Remind us of our authority in Jesus Christ to remind us of the victory that Jesus has already won against the enemy and help us to live within that freedom."

I would invite you to do the same thing in your home, maybe with your family, maybe by yourself. If you're struggling, if you're mat is your marriage go to that place of prayer within your home and say, in effect, "Lord, I take authority in Jesus Christ and I claim my marriage for Jesus. And I cast out in Jesus's name all demonic forces that have undermined what God wants for this marriage." If you're mat is for your family, do the same thing, if there's something going on in your home and you don't have a word or phrase for it, do that in your home. Go to that place, gather your family together and remind yourself who's already won that battle. Stand on that mat and claim what is rightfully yours. Your identity in Christ and watch what God does to bring healing and hope. Please note that whenever you take a stand and move towards Jesus, the enemy will increase his attacks to try to get you to back off. When that happens, stand your ground, Paul says, and remember and remind the enemy that Jesus has already won, and the enemy has no place over you. Will you pray with me?

*Father God, I thank You for all of what You did on the Cross of Jesus Christ and through His death and resurrection, You have brought us into your family. Lord, as we say yes to Jesus, You have said yes to us and we are now adopted sons and daughters, co-heirs with Jesus Christ. And so, Lord, I pray that You would equip each and every one in the sound of my voice with that confidence and assurance that they can indeed stand in the midst of the battle and trust that You have already won the war. Equip us Lord to be your church as we pray this in Jesus' name and all God's people said. Amen.*

Friends, thank you for joining us for worship today. We know that we go out into the world different each time we worship the Lord, reminding ourselves that He is in control, that nothing is going to happen to us that is outside of the sovereignty of God. So go forth in confidence, go forth in strength, go take it to the mat and remember the victory is already won. God bless you. Have a great week. Amen.