

Preparing for the Battle
“Sharing our faith” – Part IV
January 24, 2016

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Ephesians 6:10-20 (NIV)

Last Sunday we looked at this same Scripture passage, from Ephesians 6:10-20, where the title of my message was *The Urgent War*, and I said perhaps the biggest problem that we face when it comes to Evangelism is that we don't recognize the war that we are in – the war over individual people's eternal destinies, nor the power of the enemy – Satan, and that it is God's primary calling on our lives as Christians – whether one has the spiritual gift of Evangelism or not. Jesus' *Great Commission* – *Therefore go and make disciples of people from all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you* – was not just for his original disciples but for his disciples for all time.

Other than not recognizing *The Urgent War* that we are in, probably the second and third reasons we struggle with *Evangelism*, or are not effective at it, is we don't take the time to prepare for the battle and we fight with the wrong weapons.

In his book, *One to One: A Practical Guide to Friendship Evangelism*, Terry Wardle writes that “Effective evangelism begins with developing a quality devotion to our Lord that serves as the source of our life and witness. It demands a personal commitment to spiritual growth.” Wardle writes,

“Unfortunately, many Christians are unable to offer ‘Living Water’ to the lost. Why? Because they lack depth in their relationship with Christ. Their experience with Jesus is shallow and polluted by worldly, unchristian lifestyles. While trusting Christ for salvation, believers often do not grow in their daily walk with Him. They fail to regularly attend church, study Scripture, pray and fellowship with other Christians. As a result, shallow commitment keeps them from experiencing the Spirit's overflow. Such Christians struggle with their faith, and ultimately have little to offer others.”

Terry Wardle, *One on One*, p. 65

As I read that I couldn't help but think that description does not describe most of the people here. I think there is a genuine commitment from most people here to at least try and grow in their daily walk with Christ, to attend church regularly, to study Scripture, and to pray and fellowship with other Christians. Could we be better? Certainly, we can always do better. Perhaps our biggest challenge today is the busyness of our lives and our mixing of Christian and worldly values and lifestyles, where we've gotten to the point where often we ourselves don't recognize the one from the other. Evangelism begins with preparing our own hearts and then extends to other people.

Ultimately, evangelism is about people and can only be done through interactions and relationships with people. There has to be some overflow or margin in our lives to have the time to interact with people. The trouble with our lives today is that we're so busy with our own lives – families, jobs, sports, traveling, vacations, extra-curricular activities, hobbies, church activities, entertainment, social media, and on and on – there is no margin or overflow.

Jesus had overflow or margin in his life. He interacted with people in a lot of different settings as he went about his daily life. He often had some of his core group of disciples with him but he personally interacted with lots of different people. From his committed followers (which for us would be other Christians), to those in positions of power (whether it be religious or secular), and especially those who were considered the outcasts - the poor, the sick, the demon possessed (those today who we might even see as evil).

We have to make time in our lives to interact with people. I would like to say that we pastors have this mastered, just like we do all the other areas of our lives. But I can't say that, just like I can't say that for most of the other areas.

But when it comes to busyness, most of us pastors are even worse. I have recently been reading a book entitled "Mile Wide, Inch Deep, Experiencing God Beyond the Shallows, Soul Care for Busy Pastors." In it the author, David Jacobs, quotes from Eugene Peterson, the translator of the Bible version *The Message* who pastored thirty plus years, doing the translating and writing books at the same time. This hit home, but I don't think it's just for pastors, I think it's for all Christians –

"The word **busy** is the symptom not of commitment but betrayal. It is not devotion but defection. The adjective **busy** set as a modifier to pastor [or Christian] should sound to our ears like adulterous to characterize a husband or wife, or embezzling to describe a banker. It is an outrageous scandal, a blasphemous affront...How can I lead people into the quiet place beside the still waters if I am in perpetual motion?"

We are supposed to be helping lead people to Jesus, the one who said, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Our fifty and sixty hour workweeks leave us tired and drained. And for many maybe it's not 50-60 hours at one job, but add up the hours of all the other things you are doing as well, and I'm sure it goes even beyond the 50-60 hours for many.

Too much activity leads to too little time for sitting alone with God. And they're usually not bad things. Often they're good things. But doing too many good things prevents us from doing the better things and those things which God has called us to do, those which should come first in our lives: our relationship with Him and with other people, not just those who are already saved, but also the lost.

Preparing for the battle of Evangelism starts with preparing our hearts and then making time in our lives for other people.

The second element of effective Evangelism, or the third if you count last week's element of just recognizing that the war exists, is using the right weapons.

Paul and all the others in his day would have been very familiar with the uniform and the weapons of the Roman soldiers. It would have been in their face every day. You see we go about our lives each and every day without seeing any soldiers. That's not the case in many countries. Go to Israel and Jerusalem and there are uniformed and well armed soldiers everywhere. Go to Palestine and the West Bank and it's even more so. People who live there each and every day are quite familiar with the uniform and the weapons of this world's soldiers, especially if it's a county occupied by an opposing army.

But since our fight is not against flesh and blood, Paul says we need different weapons if we are going to win the war against the spiritual forces of evil. And he lists the weapons in our passage this morning:

“Full armor of God”	“Belt of truth”	“Breastplate of Righteousness”
“Shield of Faith”	“The Gospel of Peace”	“Helmet of Salvation”
“Sword of the Spirit – the word of God”		“Prayer”

While all those weapons are needed in all of our Christian walk during our life here on earth I would like to specifically highlight three when it comes to the task which God has given all of us regarding evangelizing. And just in case you are still questioning whether it's all of our responsibility I give you this quote from J.I. Packer in his book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. **“Always and everywhere the servants of Christ are under orders to evangelize.”**

The three essential weapons of evangelism if we are to do it effectively:

1. “The sword of the Spirit” – that which is the word of God
2. The Holy Spirit him/herself
3. Prayer

“The sword of the Spirit” or the word of God is necessary if we are to evangelize, which means we must know the word of God. For the first almost forty years of my life, for the good majority of those years which I referred to myself as a Christian, I had very little knowledge of the word of God. Many people today who refer to themselves as Christians have little knowledge of the word of God. In a time in which there are more versions of the Bible than ever before, and it is available in just about any format you can think of, biblical illiteracy among all those who

identify themselves as “Christian” in America today is greater than ever before. I think that is connected to our busyness and all the many things competing for our time and attention today. But being familiar with the word of God affects all those other weapons: truth, righteousness, faith, and even salvation. It is hard to effectively share the Good News of the gospel when you don’t even really know the whole/full gospel.

The “word of God” is not just the Bible, the Scriptures which we know as the Old Testament and the New Testament, but it is also Jesus Christ. The ultimate purpose of the Scriptures is to reveal the image of the invisible God to us over time. Jesus himself is the fullest image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). But Jesus and the Scriptures don’t contradict themselves. That would be saying that God contradicts Himself. Just because we don’t humanly understand something in the Bible, or there appears to be contradictions (which there certainly appears to be some), doesn’t mean that God contradicts himself. It just means that at this point we don’t see clearly. And we don’t have Jesus with us today, at least in bodily form.

We are left with the written word of God, otherwise known as the Bible, and the Holy Spirit. The Bible says that anyone who has repented, been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and puts their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation and as Lord of their lives, has received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

If we have it, then why don’t we use it more? The Holy Spirit, that which is one of the primary weapons in this invisible war, *against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*, is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

How especially important the weapon of the Holy Spirit is to evangelism. Jesus’ words to his original disciples in a different context are also quite appropriate when it comes to evangelizing: “Do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you”(Matthew 10:19-20).

The third and most essential weapon or tool when it comes to evangelizing, sharing the Good News with others is prayer. I don’t think it is just a coincidence that Paul ends this passage on preparing for the battle(s) with so much focus on prayer:

¹⁸ And **pray** in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of **prayers** and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always **keep on praying** for all the Lord’s people.¹⁹ **Pray** also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel,²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. **Pray** that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.
Ephesians 6:18-20 (NIV)

Pray, pray, pray, pray some more, keep on praying. Do you get the drift? The battle is not just ours. Ultimately the battle is God’s. We are just the people that he uses to help fight the battles. In my devotions for this past week I came across these words from Oswald Chambers in *My Utmost for His Highest*, quite appropriate from my message this morning and our task of evangelizing: “We are not sent to battle for God, but to be used by God in His battlings.”

Just a handful of us from Oak Grove attended last week's showing of *War Room* last Saturday night at Bethel. I would highly recommend it to everyone and even to the library committee to purchase one for the congregation, a movie which shows the importance and the power of prayer. Just the fact that a much greater number of us will go see the new Star Wars movie versus those who will see *War Room* points out that the fact that we really have no idea of the war we are in or why we are losing it.

Next week Alex is going to be talking about Friendship or Relationship Evangelism, the fact that especially today, one cannot really do effective evangelism without being in a relationship with the person we are trying to evangelize. The week after that we close our series with a very special guest, one who has an infectious passion for sharing the Good News. After listening to this person, if you can't get excited about sharing your faith, something's wrong.

I would like to close my message this morning with my own personal testimony. While some might think so, I do not have the spiritual gift of evangelism. Or at least it's not one of my top ones. It does not come naturally for me.

What I do know is that for the good part of my life I was one of those "nominal Christians" that I talked about last week. And the interesting thing is that I don't really know if I was one of those "nominal Christians" who believed just a little, a very small amount or I was one who was just existing as something in name only, not actual or real. I think I might have been one of the later ones. I am sure glad my life here on earth didn't end back then.

But then something happened. God used many events in my life, different people, and eventually his word – "the sword of the Spirit" to get my attention. To help me recognize that I really was an imposter, living in name only. There was a lot of sin in my life. It was only through my repentance, the baptism for the forgiveness of my sins, and my confession of Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord that I became saved. None of that was my own doing. And while other people were involved, people that he used for the battle, make no mistake about it, it was mostly God's doing. How ungrateful I would be if I didn't do something in return. If I didn't join Him in the battle for individual souls which still rages today.

I don't think I am very good at sharing the gospel in words, at least exact words. I just pray for the Holy Spirit to place people in my life who he wants me to help. And I pray that He gives me the right words to say and when. Mostly I just try and talk about Jesus if the opportunity presents itself. And I pray.

When I came here 13 years ago I made a conscious effort to get out and interact with people. First it was serving as a volunteer chaplain at Mary Rutan Hospital. I figured people would be really sick, many even dying, what better place to share the gospel. Kind of a captive audience, you know?

I'll never forget one of the first people that I had the opportunity to minister to. I got a call from the hospital saying that there was someone that really needed to speak to a pastor. I sprung into action, figuring someone was dying and I was going to be able to share the Good News.

When I got there I discovered that this woman wasn't dying, she was just having an anxiety attack. An anxiety attack because she just had gotten arrested for writing a bad check and I think the hospital seemed like a much better option to her at the time than jail. But she shared her struggles with me, especially her financial struggles and I prayed for her. I gave her my phone number and said if she needed anything just call.

Well a short time later she called. This time they had just gotten their electric turned off, not because they had not paid their bill, but her husband got so desperate that he actually climbed the pole and tied into their neighbor's electric line. As a church we helped get them out of that mess. She even started coming to church, to the second service, and though she said she liked the church, I'm sure there were many ways in which she felt like she didn't fit in. It's kind of hard when you're dirt poor, have only one or two sets of clothes, can't shower as much as the others, and can't kick the addiction to cigarettes which was passed on to her by her own family.

Then she got sick, diagnosed with Peripheral Artery Disease which slows down and eventually stops the blood flow to the limbs and then to the organs of the body. She had one leg amputated, then the other. Many times she would call just to talk and want me to pray for her. Other times she would call when they really needed financial assistance again. I tried to figure out exactly how many different places I visited her because they moved so often because they couldn't keep up with the rent. I came up with at least six over the 12 years. I'm sure it was even more. I never really shared the gospel message in exact or specific words. I just talked about Jesus and I prayed in Jesus' name. She knew she was probably not going to live very long because her father had died of the same disease in his 40's.

And then about six years ago she called and she said she wanted me to know that she was getting baptized at a church in Mechanicsburg and she wanted me to know because she felt I was instrumental in helping get her to that place. I thought to myself, why? All I did over the years was to listen to her, pray for her (both in person at times and apart from her), helped her out when we could. I was just one of the many people and the many different events in her life that **God** used to get her to that place.

About a year ago she called again and said they had just moved back to Bellefontaine and wanted me to stop by and talk. Their financial situation had not changed. It was another rental house which I don't think anyone here from church would want to live in with almost no furniture. I sat on a kitchen chair in the living room while she sat in her wheel chair. She said, you know I'm pretty close to dying, any physical event that I have from here on out can take my life, would you be willing to do my funeral? It was kind of hard to say "no." And why would I? She knew where she was going, I knew where she was going. Her faith in Jesus had become infectious.

In November I got another call. Her name came up on my cell phone and I was pretty excited to talk to her once again. Except that it wasn't her. It was her distraught husband who said she had just died and he wanted me to know, and to see if I would do her funeral. I think it was the hardest funeral I have done. The closeness we had developed over all the years, and the interesting thing is that while she thought I had done a lot, she ministered to me just as much as I ministered to her. To see her faith in all her struggles – financial, physical . . .

To know she was going home to Jesus but leaving behind her husband, three children, and three young grandchildren, but also to see that her faith in Jesus had been passed on to them. Wow!

You see, we never know when we're going to touch someone's life, or how much impact we're going to have. Evangelism is really just about making ourselves available, allowing the Holy Spirit to lead us, to give us the right words to say, and to pray and pray and pray. And when you see and experience events like that you know it wasn't really about me, it was about God.

Let us Pray:

God, we have so much to be thankful for. Thankful for the gift of life that you give each of us during our life here on earth. Most of all, thankful for the gift of eternal life which you offer to each and every single one of us through your Son, Jesus Christ – through His perfect life here on earth and then his death on the cross, the one and final sacrifice for sins – for all those who repent, accept the gift, are baptized, and put their faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord.