

“Being Made Strong”

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Providence United Methodist Church

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The text for today is from the 6th chapter of Ephesians, chapter 6, verses 10 through 20. I'll be reading from the NRSV. “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 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, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.”

“With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.” This is God's word for God's people. Thanks be to God. Let's pray. Invincible and strong God, bless the reading of your word that we just heard. Sharpen our hearing to know this is for us as we are continually shaped to become more like you. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Over the last few weeks we've learned that Christ provides all the spiritual blessings we need for unity. Unity is experienced when humility is shown and love is communicated. Paul also reminded us how important it is to be loving and forgiving to each other. Our goal is to mature spiritually and allow the Holy Spirit to shape us so we act more and more like Christ every day. *This* is one of the many reasons we need to use God's love; it's a strong spiritual armor. It's like a protection. When we put on God's love and give it away, our walk of faith matures. There's always going to be opposition, and probably our biggest opposition comes from within our own self. We need to stay protected with God's love.

I found this text to be a real disconnect when I first started studying it. Paul the apostle talks about militaristic images. That seems hard. Then in this last chapter he focuses on humility and forgiving each other. So, one moment we're forgiving our brother and sister in the Lord, and the next minute we're putting on God's armor of love? Let's take a look at it more closely.

There's only one piece of armor that's used offensively in the list Paul gives us. That's the word of God. There's no doubt in our minds that we're dealing with evil forces in the world. We see it and hear about it in the news every day. In the text that was read, Paul tells us that “. . . 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.” Let's remind ourselves, **we're not fighting against people**. We've got to see beyond people, and it's not flesh and blood that is our enemy People are involved, but they're not the real problem. Satan is the enemy. God gives us the sword of the spirit—which is the word of God; this is our offensive weapon.

The word of God, the sword of the Spirit, it's something we turn into ourselves. This we've said many times over the last few weeks. The Book of Hebrews tells us that "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The sword is to judge *our* thoughts and intentions—not others. *We're to use it* as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit.

When we're tempted to lash out at someone and allow anger to rear its ugly head. Our power is to respond in patience and love. Love disarms the enemy and our passion as we turn this sword into ourselves, and we mature spiritually. This is our aim as a Christian—to be transformed. The more you use a physical sword the duller it becomes. When we speak in anger or impatience we're using a physical sword. The more you use the sword of the Spirit or God's word the sharper it becomes. This is when we respond in love to others despite how they've treated us. But we've got to *take* the sword and pick it up. We've got to use it. A physical sword kills and hurts, but the spiritual sword gives healing and life.

When we respond to others in love we push back the boundaries of the enemy. The enemy—he'll always be there as long as we're in this body of flesh. As give love, especially in a conflicted situation, God's love increases in us. And the words we speak in love don't return void. They accomplish the purpose of God within us and in the world. So if you're reading, studying, and asking God to help you to apply the word of God in your life—you are *being made strong*.

Verse 10 begins by saying to "be strong." The strength we chase after in life isn't something we get overnight. The verb strong is in present tense and suggests an ongoing action. Additionally, it's *not* something we gather up out of our own

resources or by our own talents. To “be strong” has connotations of “being made strong,” so it’s a continual process. We rely on God for our strength.

The strong Christian cooperates with God to be *made strong* as we respond in love to others. We slay our own impatience, our anger, our greed, and our desire for control. Satan can’t read our minds, but he can sway our mind if we don’t guard our heart. We must be vigilant and protect and guard our heart. We’ve got to pray and do our best to live out what we say we believe. If we say, “I love you” then we must act it out. Words are cheap, but actions make the point loud and clear.

Let’s use the strong and offensive piece of armor that is God’s love—the sword of the Spirit. Love—it quenches all the fiery darts of the evil one. Let’s determine to *be made strong*, and allow the love of God to control us and reign in our lives. Let’s pray. God of love who is the Lord of Hosts, sharpen our desire for wielding the sword of the spirit. Move within us to respond to each other in love. Help us to show Christian love to others in action for it shows your presence and power in the world. Motivate us to grow in love. Help us to take up this sword and use it. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.