

A quick glance around the world of news, social media, college campuses, and our government these days gives a glimpse into the condition of our culture. There is intense disagreement over what is true: politics, justice, marriage, sexuality, masks and vaccines, if it's appropriate for an Olympic athlete to pull herself out of the competition, and what's the best BBQ in Texas. Even the concept of truth itself is in question. Does 2+2 really equal 4? Due to technological advancements, globalization, and secularization, we have more information than ever, more ideas at our fingertips, and have witnessed massive cultural shifts that have taken place in a short period of time. When you put all that together, you get a world, a culture, that is pluralistic, polarized, and, as my mother-in-law might have said, lacking in manners.

And this morning, the Church woke up with the same mandate Jesus gave 2,000 years ago: Go and make disciples. How do we do that? How do we engage this mess we live in every day? That question was much easier to answer just 20 or 30 years ago. Even for most non-believers, a biblical worldview and Scriptural defense of certain ideas was considered legitimate. But not anymore. Darrell Bock, executive director of cultural engagement at Dallas Seminary, whose book *Cultural Intelligence* influenced this series and Life Group curriculum, and who will be speaking at our men's and women's event next month, says it this way:

“Gone are the days where culturally one can use Scripture as an imprimatur for an idea's validity. Now one has to make the case that what is being presented fits an authentic and effective way of life...The reality of this change has rocked the church...Still, none of these challenges or changes alters the need for the church to image God to the world. That is the assignment God gave those he calls to him. We are called to be an incarnation of God's presence in the world, his audiovisual in a unique set of individuals and a special community. How we engage in showing God's grace and character matters. The content of what we believe matters, but so does tone.” -Darrell Bock

The church has responded to these cultural shifts in many ways. Some have checked out culturally, but God never intended us to be secluded. Some have yoked themselves to political movements, but the Kingdom of God needs no backup/partners/allies. Some have tried to engage with the hostile tactics so much of the culture uses, but God isn't asking us to win the Culture War. Some have tried to fit in, to be so like the world that we lose our distinctiveness. But God's intent has always been for the Church to be counter-cultural. In other words, it's not working.

And when the Church says, “It's not working”, our instinct must be to return to Scripture and see if God has anything to say about it. Thankfully, in this case, he does. Over the next six weeks we are going to look at six key passages in the New Testament to learn and begin to live out how God has called the Church to engage the culture. Through it, we'll be reminded of the purpose of our engagement, the process of our engagement, how we are to engage in a biblically rooted way, and the results God will create if we do this faithfully.

Today we will start with nature of our battle and what we are to use to fight it. I love war documentaries and most include historians talking about the losing side. They say things like “They were fighting the wrong war”, “They didn't understand the nature of their enemy”, or “They were not equipped with the necessary resources to win.” The church is no different. If we are to engage culture, we have to begin by understanding what and who it is we are engaging, the

purpose of our mission, and the resources we've been given to fight. If we don't, our efforts will be misdirected, ineffective, and damaging. So, we start with the most fundamental idea for this whole series...

People are not the enemy. They are the mission.

Our engagement with culture is one of rescue, not conquest.

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

If believers are going to have a Kingdom impact in the culture, we have to have a biblical view of the people who make up that culture. Paul says it's not people we are fighting against. Jesus never said, "Defeat your unbelieving neighbor" or "Crush your enemy." He told us to love them, and love is never opposed to whom it is directed.

For many years I had someone in my family who believed very differently than me, and I made sure she knew it and knew all the reasons why. We'd get in conversations and, as Martha calls it, Grizzly Bear Kurt came out. Big and forceful and direct. I'd put together these incredible arguments, disprove what she was saying, and finish most of those arguments more worried about if I won than if it made any difference in her. And then one day I felt like God said to me "You are so right, but you are doing it so wrong."

We can win every argument without ever winning anyone to Christ. That's because you cannot win someone over if your intent is to defeat them. That reflex is understandable. We look into the dark world and are shocked and appalled by so many things. But the key here is to not be surprised. You've likely heard the saying "Shooters gonna shoot" and "Haters gonna hate." Well, add to that "Sinners gonna sin". You walk in the ways of God because you have been given the Spirit of God who enables you to do so. Unbelievers have no Spirit of God, so they are incapable because they do not know better.

During my first trip to Israel, our group went to a Jewish family's home for Shabbat (Sabbath) dinner. Friday sundown meant no more work, and this family took it seriously. It was a glorious time. Our whole group was seated and I wanted to memorialize it, so I grabbed my phone and took a picture. As soon as I did I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye and, suddenly, the wife/mother of this family said electronics were not to be used and asked me to put it away. As she walked away, those sitting around me gave me looks of "Busted!" You haven't lived until you've been gently and lovingly scolded by a Jewish housewife. After they teased me, my response was "I didn't know!"

And neither does culture. When we get to the place of accepting that, we are freed up. It changes our perspective, it directs our compassion towards them, increases our patience and curiosity, and allows us to engage in a different way. It also helps us see who the real enemy is.

The fight we are in is not physical. It's spiritual. Paul says our real battle is against Satan, his minions, and the power of sin in this world. All of these forces are hell bent on advancing darkness and keeping God's people incapacitated to engage. When we look at this dark culture and are angered and heartbroken, we see the rotten fruit of these forces. And while people participate in it and will be held to account, God sends us into the darkness not to seek and destroy, but to rescue. And since we know our true enemy, we can be properly equipped when we engage.

The resources you bring to the battlefield reflect the battle you believe you're in. If we recognize the battle we're in is spiritual, we know we'll need to engage with spiritual resources. Thankfully, God gives us everything we need.

¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵ and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; ¹⁷ and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

If we are going to engage culture and battle against the spiritual forces of darkness, we are going to need the spiritual resources only God provides. Go back to v 10. It says, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might." We cannot stand firm in this battle on our own. Our enemy is wiser, craftier, more powerful than we are. Our engagement must be empowered and equipped by God, and he provides through what many of us know as the armor of God.

You will be doing a deeper dive in your Life Groups on each piece of armor, but I want to group them and speak to each. God gives us his Truth, our faith in that truth, and the way we live in light of that truth.

Truth. Do you realize how counter-cultural we are because we say there's truth and that it's knowable? That means we should be the most calm and confident people as the world exchanges ideas. Not smug, but also not insecure. We have the truth to fight back against the lies of darkness (not as a weapon against people). And as we obey God and pass on the truth, and we can be comfortable when opposing ideas are expressed and be able to engage those with invitation, not condemnation.

That's how Paul worked at the Aeropaus in Acts 17. He met them where they were in their beliefs and said "Here's the truth. I offer it to you to consider and own for yourselves." When people agreed, he welcomed them in. When people disagreed, he moved on at peace.

Culture struggles to do that because so much of the culture says there is no truth or that we all have our own truth. Think of the instability that creates. What happens when someone else's truth contradicts my truth? I have to either conclude that two mutually exclusive ideas can both be true at the same time, or I have to conclude that one of us is wrong...and it ain't me! Opposing views become threats, and many respond accordingly and vehemently. For the Christian, we stand on the truth of God's Word, anchored in place, so when opposing views are

expressed, we have no need to get defensive or insecure. We can welcome in those opposing views, dialogue with them, have compassion for those expressing them, and invite them to believe what we know the truth to be.

Our faith in that truth is protection when the lies of the devil, whose name means “The Accuser”, are fired at us. The devil does not want us in this fight. He wants to take us out by getting us to focus on ourselves. Many of you are wondering right now if you have anything to offer the culture, know what to say or do, or think you’re too broken to make a difference. Lies, lies, lies, lies. You are a fully loved and accepted child of God, you have been made new by the Spirit of God, and he has given you the power to make a difference in his name.

How we live in light of that truth is protection and part of our witness. We have the breastplate of righteousness. We are declared righteous when we trust in Christ for salvation, and we are also enabled to live righteously, in a way pleasing to him, leaving no room for the devil to make inroads, and in a way that is compelling to an unbelieving and dark culture. I saw a quote recently that said, “Who you are speaks so loudly I can barely hear your words.” Our righteous acts of love and service will change the culture we are to engage and pull people in.

Those are the resources God gives us, but we have to choose to put them on. Paul tells us how.

¹⁸ praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.

Spiritual resources are engaged through spiritual practices, namely prayer. It is through our relationship with the Lord that he pours out his grace, teaching us Truth, expanding our faith by reminding us who we are in him, and increasing our desire to live a life pleasing to him. Prayer is how we put on our armor. But don’t miss this. Prayer is also how we help others put on their armor. Don’t read Ephesians 6 as a lone soldier in the wilderness. We are in the together, and just like military soldiers check each other’s armor and equipment, we too can help one another put on their armor through our supplication for all the saints. If you are looking for a place to start, visit our prayer rooms after service and come this Wednesday to Prayer Night. Martha will lead a time of prayer starting at 7:00 in Room 201.

Who were you when you were first engaged with the Gospel, and how was it done?

There is nothing more infuriating than a lost sinner until we remember we used to be one ourselves. We are a lot more likely to engage the culture in the way Scripture calls us to if we remember who we used to be before Christ, the way we were subject to the schemes of the devil and the power of sin, and how that darkness manifested in and through our lives. And as you remember the condition you were in, remember who God used to draw us to himself and how they engaged you. My guess is few, if any of us, have a testimony that includes us getting crushed by the bearer of the Good News. Think about it. Was it hostile or gentle? Combative or compassionate? Accusational or invitational? Remember to be humbled and go out with the Spirit of Christ and compassion of seeing them as God sees them.

What’s your current engagement strategy?

What are you doing presently to engage the culture? How's that working for you? Are people responsive or repelled? Are you leaving people better than you found them? Do they know you care about them, or do they think it's ultimately about you? What's more important, your relationship with someone, or your need to be right? Pray about that this week. Check your motivations. Listen to your tone. Assess the condition of your heart. And see how others are responding. I know you want to make a difference for the Kingdom. It is your purpose. Lean in during this series, let God show you how it's done, and go. The world needs you, and God wants to use you.

We close this morning remembering how Jesus engaged us. Song. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While there was a culture war between the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of Man, Jesus chose to engage with grace, love, sacrifice, hope, and invitation to follow when in order to reconcile man back to God. We have been called to follow his example, and this morning we celebrate the culmination of that cultural engagement through communion.