

Good morning! Welcome to Fellowship Dallas. I'm so glad that you're here today to worship with us. Last week we celebrated Easter and we had so many people attend church here. When you combine all of the adult services with our children's ministry, we had well over 3,000 people join us to celebrate Christ and His resurrection. We really had a great weekend. I am so thankful to serve on staff at a church that is genuinely welcoming to all who enter our doors to worship each and every week.

If you remember, last week Gary shared from Paul's letter to the Colossians. After going over how Christ's death on the cross cancels out our record of wrongdoing, Gary mentioned this verse from Colossians, Colossians 2:15. Talking about Jesus, Paul writes, "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame." Read that again – Jesus disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame. Paul is suggesting that not only did Christ's sacrifice on the cross take those of us who believe from death to life, Christ's work on the cross also took all of the demonic rulers and authorities and disarmed them. In other words, while our death sentence was commuted to eternal life, a new death sentence was issued for the rulers and authorities of evil.

If you've only begun to visit Fellowship Dallas in the last couple of weeks, then you probably don't know that during February and most all of March, we read through the New Testament as a church. The whole thing. It took about 20 minutes, or so, every day, but we did it. (At the very least, most of us tried.) As we read, there were several things that kept popping up to me. One of those things is this epic battle that seems to be going on. An epic battle between God and the forces of evil.

You see it in the Gospels. Christ is tempted by Satan in the desert. He confronts awful weather. He heals chronic sickness. Jesus speaks to people who were under the influence of demons and even speaks to the demons – dialogues with them. You see this epic battle continue in the book of Acts and into Paul's letters and the other writers of the New Testament. Paul, in his letters to churches, encourages believers to not succumb to Satan, not to give him a way into their lives, giving them encouragement as they are tormented by him. And, of course, if you made it to the end of the reading and were able to read through John's Revelation, then you saw what will be the culmination of this epic struggle. At the end of time, Christ finishes what He began at the cross and all of Satan and his minions will be put away for good.

But what about now? What do we do, as we await Christ's return? How should we live? I mean, it's kind of easy to ignore a lot of that demon stuff, even though it's all over the Bible. After all, we can't see them. And besides, Christ wins in the end, so why bother with them?

Our country is really going through a lot of interesting things right now. Our culture is shifting at a very rapid pace. Things we thought ten years ago wouldn't be allowed are now legal. We are in the middle of a political race, which is exposing some of the greatest weaknesses in our society. And, somehow, two of the least popular figures in the country are the two front-runners to be Commander In Chief. More and more, it seems like our country is on edge. And no one can seem to agree on anything of substance.

And it's no better around the world. You would think that with the spread of technology and democracy over the last several decades that persecution would be going away, but persecution is actually on the rise. Violence around the world is at an all-time high. Slavery, sex trafficking, police brutality, property grabbing and the blatant abuse of basic human rights are not getting better each year.

It's almost as if something is stirring all of this up on purpose. Or should I say *someone*.

When it comes to Satan and the Demonic, I think people tend to go one of two ways. I don't mean to over-generalize, but I feel like the pendulum swings pretty strongly as people think about evil. There's one group of people who don't even want to believe that Satan is real. And I'm not just talking about atheists or Buddhists. There are people who believe in God and even believe in Jesus, but think that the Satan of the Bible is really just a symbol of evil. He's no more real than the boogie-man or the monsters under your bed growing up. I don't usually quote movies in my sermon, but I can't help but think about *The Usual Suspects* when Kevin Spacey's character says, "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world that he doesn't exist." So that's one group of people. The group who says that Satan isn't even real or he isn't someone worth paying attention to.

And then there's this other group of people, who think that Satan is behind every corner. Like Flip Wilson in the 70s or the Church Lady on Saturday Night Live in the 80s, everything that goes wrong is the fault of Satan who is everywhere doing everything bad. For this group, every time they do something wrong, it's Satan's fault. Any time something is messed up, it's the work of the devil. If you're at the Rangers game and you spill ketchup from your hot dog, some demon tipped the bun. If you're trying to make it to an appointment on time and the light turns yellow at just the wrong moment, it's the prince of darkness making you late. And if you're preparing a sermon about spiritual warfare at one of your favorite coffee houses and the WiFi goes out, it is most certainly the work of Lucifer, himself. I'm sure demons have nothing better to do than mess with coffee shop WiFi.

But even for those of us who don't fit into either of these two groups, this can be a tricky subject. Maybe you believe that Satan is real and demons are real, but talking about them just really weirds you out. Maybe you don't blame every wrong thing on Satan, but sometimes you feel as if there's a big bull's eye painted on your back. I know I've felt both of those ways, at times. I don't particularly enjoy talking about this subject. And there are some times that I do feel like my life is more than just a series of bad coincidences, that there is something dark going on, maybe even oppressive.

We're calling the series we're beginning today *The Invisible War*. And this series which will take us through most of May is centered on the end of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, specifically, Ephesians 6:10-20. And in this passage, we see Paul call out this epic struggle I've been talking about. In doing so, he manages to not only size up what is going on in the unseen spiritual realm, but he also manages to take the things we can see in the physical realm and puts them in a far better perspective.

So, if you have your Bibles, turn with me to the sixth chapter of Ephesians. Again, the passage we are focusing on is Ephesians 6:10-20. Keep in mind that Ephesus was a town that was quite familiar with the worship of idols and had plenty of people around tempted to worship the gods. While you're turning to Ephesians, let me give you a little insight into the things that were going on in Ephesus at the time. In Acts 19, Luke writes about people coming to Christ in Ephesus. So many of them were coming from practicing in the occult, that he felt it was important to mention. In Acts 19:18-20, Luke writes "Many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily."

So this is the environment that Paul is confronting. So with that culture in mind, let's begin reading Ephesians six, beginning in verse 10: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. 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. 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. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, 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, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak."

For the next two months, we are going to look closely at this passage to see what it has to say for how we live as believers in Christ. Today, I want to begin by looking closely at verse 12. Let me read that verse again for you: "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."

Looking at this verse, there are a few things I think we can take with us to carry throughout this series. And the first thing I want to look at is the problem behind your problems. *Your problems are deeper than flesh and blood.* Your problems are deeper than flesh and blood. We all have problems. Some problems are more important than others. Maybe your problems are financial; you are having trouble making ends meet and you're not sure how you'll get to the end of the month. For some of us, our problems are physical; you or a loved one is sick. Maybe you're *really* sick. For others, our problems are relational; there are people you work with, you live with, you interact with and there's such a sharp division between you and this other person that you think you're going to pull your hair out. We all have a list of problems with one or two things at the top of the list.

We do not wrestle against flesh and blood. When he writes “flesh and blood,” he is indicating the physical realm. These are the problems we can see, hear, smell, touch and taste. Paul writes these physical problems are simply a shadow of something deeper going on. Your physical problems are simply *manifestations* of something far more intense. In fact, the true struggle isn't with your problems at all. There is something behind them – something connected to these problems that is so deep, you may not even realize it because we can't see it.

Now Paul isn't suggesting we ignore our problems. He isn't suggesting we forget our problems. He isn't even suggesting that we stop calling them problems. Our struggle isn't fake! I can say without any hint of irony, *The struggle is real.* What he's saying is that there is more to our problems than what the surface may indicate. And simply boiling your problem down to a person or to something else physical is missing a deeper reality. There is a deeper fight going on – a wrestling match that is far greater than anything you can see or hear or feel.

So, then what is this deeper foe? This deeper struggle? Back to verse 12: Paul writes that our true struggle is “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” A movie came out last year called *Heaven is For Real.* What Paul is indicating here is that *Hell is for Real.* Hell is for real. I know this might feel strange to think about, but behind our earthly problems lies a spiritual reality: there is a devil who comes to steal, kill and destroy. And this devil has an army of minions roaming throughout the earth seeking to do his will.

How does Paul describe our adversaries? He calls them rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, and spiritual forces of evil. One of my favorite professors at the seminary I went to, Dr. Constable, relates these different titles to different characteristics of those demons. By calling them rulers, Paul is indicating that they have a dominion. By calling them authorities, Paul is demonstrating that they have strength. By calling them cosmic powers, Paul is demonstrating their wide influence. And by calling them spiritual forces of evil, Paul is indicating their evil character. And these evil, influential, powerful beings who rule over this present darkness have a commander in chief whose name is Satan.

The Bible tells us that Satan is a liar and is the father of lies. And he is doing everything he can to counteract any possible act of God in your life and in our world. Christ seeks to give; every good and perfect gift comes from the Father, but Satan seeks to steal. Christ is the Author of Life, but Satan seeks to kill. Any place you go where death is prevalent is a place where Satan has been hard at work. Satan kills. And whereas Christ is the way the truth and the life, Satan is the Father of lies. If you're ever listening to someone and it seems like every single thing they say is untrue, know that Satan is at work in that person's life. That doesn't make the lying individual our enemy, but it does help us understand how much that individual needs Jesus. Satan is a liar.

And we can buy into those lies, too. We can take the lies, begin to believe them and begin to act on them. Satan's demons do everything they can to take us off of our game. Like Satan, they use lies, deception and murder. They also use temptation, doubt, guilt, fear, confusion,

sickness, envy, pride, slander, or any other means possible to hinder a Christian's witness and usefulness. Still, while Satan is powerful, he is not omnipotent. He can't make you do anything you do not want to do. He can tempt you. He can influence you. He can lie to you and tell you how awesome it will be, how great it will feel, how powerful you will become, but he cannot make you believe in that lie. We do that all on our own.

He gets us into such a lethal pattern of sin, such a downward spiral, he sometimes doesn't even need to tempt us any more because we sin on our own without his influence, at all. To the person who thinks the devil is behind every corner, understand that there are plenty of times where you do something wrong without any help from the spiritual forces of evil whatsoever. It's all on you. There certainly is a battle going on in the heavenly realms, but there is also a battle that goes on inside each and every one of us. Gary will talk about this battle next week.

Still, Satan is doing everything he can to take your life away. Satan comes to destroy. Satan is trying to take you out. Weirsbe writes, "Sooner or later every believer discovers that the Christian life is a battleground, not a playground, and that he faces an enemy who is much stronger than he is—apart from the Lord."

I say all of this not to scare you, but to prepare you. *We must prepare.* We must prepare. The goal, here, is not fear. The goal is preparation. The goal is that we turn our faces towards Christ, that we might be strong in the strength of his might. If you're hearing all of this and your first reaction is fear, then please let me remind you, Christian, that He who is in you is greater than He who is in the world. There is a prince of darkness. He is more powerful than you and I put together, but Satan is not, has never been and never will be more powerful than the God who created you. He cannot compare to the God who loves you. He cannot take anything or anyone from the God who has saved you. And Satan will look on helplessly at the end of time as our God restores you in a body that is perfect, that is free from sin and satan, as he is cast into utter darkness, will realize that there will be nothing to kill or destroy because he will have met his end.

But friends, we must prepare. And preparation is what this entire series is about. How do we prepare ourselves, knowing that a great adversary is watching our every move? The answer is simple. *We must maintain our focus on Christ. **In the midst of evil, maintain your focus on Christ.***

The sixth chapter of Ephesians is not the first place that Paul mentions spiritual powers and authorities. In the very first chapter, Paul writes about authority and power and dominion, too. Here is he writes to the Ephesians in chapter one: "For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him

from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, *far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.* And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” [emphasis added].

I don't know what problem you're up against, but Jesus is bigger. That doesn't mean He will solve it for you, but He can give you strength where you are weak. He can give you peace when you are anxious. He can give you hope when things seem dark. He can increase your faith when you begin to doubt. In the midst of trials and temptations, He alone can provide what you need to make it through and withstand the evil one. And throughout this series, we will talk more about our role in strengthening ourselves in the strength of God's might.

Your problems are deeper than flesh and blood. Hell is for real and so is Satan. His demons are working right now in this world, in our country, in our city and maybe even in your life. But we can prepare for his attacks. We must prepare. In the midst of evil, we must maintain our focus on Christ. We have no other option, if we are to reconcile this world to Christ.

Satan is at work. Hard at work. And maybe his work in your life is very involved. Perhaps you are dealing with addiction or loneliness or some sickness that is too much. Maybe you've become so obsessed with a co-worker or a relationship in your family that you can't think straight at church. Maybe Satan's influence in your life is so heavy, that you're not sure what to do. I'm glad you're here. Stay with us. Because in the next several weeks, we will have a laser-like focus on Christ Jesus and the freedom that he brings.

During this series, there is nothing that Satan would like more than to keep you from learning more about his strategy to take you down. There is nothing more he would like to do than to keep you off your game. He'll tempt you with excuses, with reasons to stay home, with reasons to not pray, with reasons to not do the things you know you should be doing.

His temptation may be minor. You may have already thought about several excuses for why Transform Dallas isn't for you. Perhaps, you've come up with some pretty impressive reasons for why the Men's Retreat isn't worth your time. Who knows? Maybe you've thought about taking Sundays off for the next two months. Please do not let Satan dissuade you from doing the things God is leading you to do. Take the time to investigate Transform Dallas. I want every man in this room to at least agree to pray about whether or not you should be attending the retreat at the end of this week. And make it point to not miss Gary next week, as he continues our series.

To withstand the barrage of attacks in spiritual warfare, we need one another. God has given each one of us a church body, centered on Christ, on whom we can rely. So let us take time to remember Christ's sacrifice as we practice communion . . .

[1 Corinthians 11:23-26]

[Encouragement to pray]