

“PRIORITIZE PRAYER”

Ephesians 6:10-13

Welcome back to BEING Challenge, a 40-day challenge to BE like Jesus. We are ultimately trying to grow in our relationship with God and so we are studying how, Jesus, the only one ever to live in perfect relationship with God did it. We’ve identified five keystone habits of Jesus and challenging ourselves to put these into practice.

Today I want to talk to you about the 3rd keystone habit of Jesus Christ. Jesus regularly Prioritized Prayer. We’ve looked so far at the importance of Committing to Community, our first keystone habit, noting that the people we allow into our lives, influence us and so let’s surround ourselves with people that have good qualities that we want in our lives. Our second keystone habit then turned to how Studying Scripture helps us discover our identity, which in turn shapes our habits.

There is an old Charlie Brown cartoon. Charlie Brown was talking to Lucy. Lucy was playing psychiatrist. Charlie is down again, depressed as usual, having bad day. Charlie asks Lucy if she ever gets down. “Not me,” Lucy says. “I don’t want any downs. I just want ups, more ups, and upper ups.” Charlie Brown says, “I can’t stand it.”



Most of us agree. If we could have it our way, we wouldn’t have any downs. Just ups, more ups and upper ups. But we all know that life doesn’t work that way. Life is full of struggles – ups and downs.

Today, if I asked you to name 1 thing struggle with right now, everyone of us would have something pop into our mind. Everyone struggles with something.

Have you ever wondered WHY? Why do we all have one struggle after another? And have you ever wondered HOW can you be victorious over the struggles you go thru? Today, we are going to

talk about WHY everyone struggles. And HOW you can be victorious in struggles.

The life of following Jesus is a life of struggle. It's a life of warfare. Let's take a look at this Bible passage, on the screen. As I read it, count how many times Paul uses the word "against." I am going to read Ephesians 6:10-13, and every time you hear the word "against" you count it. Ready?

"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 devil's schemes. 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. 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."
Ephesians 6:10-13

How many times did you count the word "against"? Some of us are struggling because you were using your toes to help you count and you couldn't get your next shoe off fast enough.

"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 devil's schemes. 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. 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." Ephesians 6:10-13

Let's count them. ... SIX times! In just 3 verses Paul uses the word "Against" SIX times! When God repeats something that means He wants us to pay attention.

Now, what does this word mean? When God guided Paul to write, Paul used the Greek language. In Greek, the word "against" literally means "hand-to-hand combat."

The point is: The life of following Jesus is NOT a spectator sport. Living for Jesus is NOT something you can view comfortably

from a distance. If you follow Jesus, whether want to be or not, you are in hand-to-hand combat.

Back 250 years ago in the Revolutionary War, it was easy for the American Army to tell who enemy was. The British Army wore bright red coats! It's not like that anymore. During the war in Iraq & Afghanistan, terrorists who had explosives under their clothes, or who shot guns at our Soldiers, tried to blend in. They tried to look like a civilian – to look like everybody else in the crowd. That made it extremely hard for our soldiers to know who was a friend they were to protect, and who was the enemy out to get them.

For you, in your life, you are in warfare, and it is important for you to **Know Your Real Enemy**. Just who are you fighting? Bible tells us: ***“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.”*** Ephesians 6:12

People today have a hard time grasping this truth. People don't believe in a literal devil and his demons. Science tells us that if we can't see something, touch it, measure it, quantify it, then it's NOT REAL.

With that kind of mindset, many people – followers of Jesus too – have hard time believing that our real struggles in life are not against what we can see, but things we see and experience are being used by the invisible forces of a very real evil being who is using everything he can, doing all he can to destroy you and your relationship with God.

Let me put it this way: If you see a bull fight in Spain the matador is usually a small man and the bull usually weighs 1 ½ tons. Most of the action in a bull fight centers around the red cape the matador waves. Huge bulls will chase the cape until they get tired and frustrated, and they eventually give up. But if the bull realized the red cape was not the real enemy, but matador was, and if bull instead of going after the red cape, went right for the matador, the matador wouldn't stand a chance!

For you, your enemy is Evil One, Satan. But he uses little red capes to frustrate us -- capes like: long traffic lights, coworkers at the office, bills, late deliveries, even family members. Usually these

“capes” come to us as other people. We think THEY are real enemy. They’re not. When you realize this, you can really focus on your REAL enemy.

God’s Word tells us, *“our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world...”* The real enemy is the Evil One, Satan. You’re caught in middle of heavy hand-to-hand combat of Good vs. Evil; the Kingdom of Light vs. the kingdom of Darkness; God vs. the Devil. You’re tangled up between them. The Evil One uses other people in your life, events as weapons to hurt you. But they’re not the real enemy. Know your REAL enemy.

A high-school boy breaks up with his high school girlfriend. She goes to her room, slams door, and cries. Then sees a picture of her boyfriend (EX-boyfriend) on dresser. In anger she grabs it, pulls the photograph out of frame, and rips it up.

Let me ask you: Did the girl hurt her former boyfriend as she ripped up his photo? No! He is miles away, doing the same to her picture. What she hurt was the image of her boyfriend. She attacked what most reminded her of him.

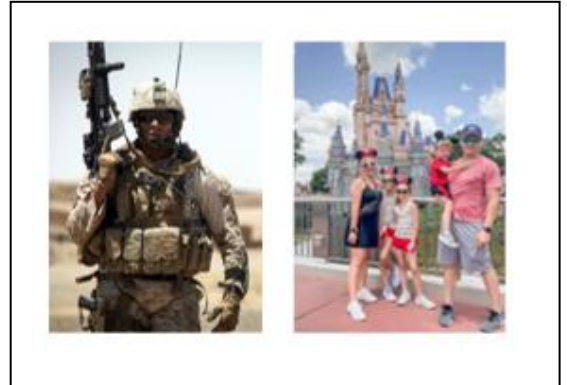
What reminds the Evil One, Satan, most of God is YOU. You are made in God’s image. You reflect the love and goodness of God. Since the devil can’t get at God directly, he gets at you. You are caught in the middle of the fight.

One most important things for soldier to do, is THINK like a soldier. YOU need to **Remember Who you are and Where you are.** You are a soldier, in enemy controlled territory. A big part of our problem, is we forget we are at war. When we forget we are soldiers at war in enemy-controlled territory. When we struggle in life the opposition often surprises us. We feel violated, resentful, like life isn’t fair.

That’s not the way soldiers think. When soldiers enlist, they EXPECT opposition. It’s part of the deal. And for you, let me remind you that when you receive God’s love, Jesus’ forgiveness of all your wrongs, when receive God’s strength to face life’s ups and downs, trusting in Jesus you receive the guarantee that heaven is where you are going. You also become part of FAMILY of God. This

means you signed up for the ARMY of God. You're enlisted. ***"Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer."*** 2 Timothy 3:3-4

One man is a soldier in a war. Another man is on vacation with his family. Could you imagine putting the civilian tourist guy in the middle of combat? It would be a disaster, wouldn't it? Why? Because a tourist at Disney world with his family expects just fun. A tourist isn't expecting or prepared for enemy opposition. But a soldier THINKS like soldier. A soldier isn't there for easy time. The soldier expects hardship, expects the enemy, expects opposition. Expecting opposition makes soldier FOCUS.



Twenty years ago, right after 9-11, Americans prayed a lot more than they had in long, long time. Why? Because suddenly we were really aware of our opposition. All of the sudden, we were no longer just living like a tourist seeking to have fun.

Folks, if you think your life should be easy and fun like tourist, what would move you to pray? Nothing. But as a follower of Jesus, when you know you live in a spiritual battle zone, when you know your enemy is real, powerful, and invisible, then you are moved to PRAY! Pray, pray, PRAY! You are moved to your knees when you remember WHO you are and WHERE you are.

To come out victorious **Know Your Mission.**

Today people are trying to figure out what's wrong with America. Some blame America's problems on the President. (Maybe you've done that). Others blame America's problems on the Congress. This is nothing new.

People look at America's problems – and we could make a long list from homeless people, to immigration, to the economy, to school kids not able to read. For any of America's problems we can always blame the President we've elected, or Congress, or the opposition political party, or media, or our nation's education system, or the

collapse of family values, or the explosion of pornography, or use and abuse of drugs.

Let me tell you what God says. Those are NOT the ultimate CAUSE of America's problems. They are Symptoms of America's real problem. The Ultimate cause is that the Evil One, Satan, has blinded the eyes of millions of Americans, so they don't see Jesus for who He is, what He's done for them, and they don't turn to Jesus as the Forgiver and Leader of their lives. They don't experience His transforming power in their lives, so that through them, God works to transform our society for the better.

The ultimate cause of America's problems is that we have forgotten God, don't want to live by His ways, and don't see a need for Jesus in our lives.

That means for you and me the greatest mission is not political reform, not social action, not passing laws. Yes, we should be involved in those things, but our greatest mission, our highest calling, our purest purpose is to take Good News of Jesus, and tell neighbors, family, co-workers the difference Jesus makes in our lives and the difference He can make in their lives too.

The result of our mission is that people leave their wrongs behind, their guilt, and their brokenness by accepting Jesus' love, and forgiveness, trust Him as their Savior from sin and hell, and follow His plan for living. When people trust Jesus, then God the Holy Spirit works to change their lives. Then they live in peace, goodness, and they love others. ONLY when that happens, only when people are changed, then there will be changes in this country and healing in this land.

THIS IS OUR MISSION! This is why St. Paul Lutheran Church of Amherst Ohio is here! There is nothing more important than connecting people to Jesus Christ. And this happens when we come together as a team, as a family of God, to grow in faith and to live our faith in Jesus.

That's why God wants you to have as your highest mission, your purest purpose, to share with other people, the difference Jesus makes. **THAT'S IT!** That's your mission. What Jesus said to Paul in Bible, years ago – He would say to you:

***"I am Jesus¹⁶Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I am sending you to [the Gentiles]¹⁸to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."* Acts 26:15-18 THIS IS OUR MISSION!**

Do you think Evil One sit by and let us share God's love with people? Is Satan going to be delighted if through us people connect with Jesus and hell is depopulated? NO! He will do everything he can to stop us. So that means, TO KEEP GOING IN this MISSION we must PRAY! Pray for God's power and God's strength.

Use Your Main Weapon. God has given us prayer as a weapon to use against the opposition. Prayer is not only your life-line of communication with God, but through prayer you appeal to God and call in HIS power and strength to work victories and do what there's no way you could do on your own.

***"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 saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should."* Ephesians 6:18-20**

Twenty years ago, when the U.S. Army went into Iraq, their strategy was to first have an effective air attack, before the soldiers on the ground went in. The air attack was to take out key enemy strongholds and disarm them.

I think you get the picture. Prayer is our air attack. When we first pray for God to go ahead, to work in people's hearts, to change situations, then the groundwork we do is easier, and effective. Prayer is your MAIN weapon.

The Bible says: ***"For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds."* 2 Corinthians 10:3-4**

For a physical battle there are physical weapons like guns and bombs. For a SPIRITUAL war, we use SPIRITUAL weapons – Prayer, calling in the power of God.

But how often we don't pray! That's not only DUMB not to call in God's power, but it is also unbelief when we don't call in His power. Our lack of prayer is foolish, and it's sinful, wrong, it's turning away from God, doubting His goodness, rejecting Him. And for that, we – every one – need to be forgiven.

That's why it's so great to **Remember the War is Won.** Forgiveness is won. Jesus did it on the cross. Nothing can undo what He's already done!

This Bible passage tells you what took place when Jesus died on the cross. When Jesus died, what did people see? They saw a man, crucified. That's it. Someone being executed is all anyone could see with their eyes. Here's what happened in the spiritual battle: ***“When you were dead in your sins and in ... your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”*** Colossians 2:13-15

On the cross Jesus won a decisive victory over the Evil One. Satan and his demonic forces may still be fighting, still launching attacks at you and me, but he has lost the war. When Jesus said “It is finished” it WAS finished. He loves you so much that He gave His life to pay for all the wrongs you've done. With sins forgiven, the Evil One has no power over you, you're no longer guilty. You no longer are destined to spend your eternity with Him. Your future is WITH God, and your present you live FOR God.

And that gives you CONFIDENCE!

In your life, you're going to have battles each day. If you're a follower of Jesus, expect warfare. You may lose some of those battles, But the WAR has been won! Keep the bigger perspective of the war.

On the cross Jesus won a decisive victory over the Evil One. In our prayers, we do not fight FOR the victory. We fight FROM the victory. Victory already won thru Jesus!

What battle are you facing today? Job loss? Financial problems? Marriage struggles? Problems getting thru to one of your children? Sickness? Loneliness or grief? What battle is raging? Don't get discouraged. Pray!

Recognize the war we're in. Recognize your role is a soldier. Focus. Rely on God. Call in God's strength. PRAY! AMEN.