

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

January 30th, 2011 (#422a)

Title: "WrestleMania" (Second in a Series on "Lord, Teach Us To Pray")

Text: Ephesians 6:10-20

Some years ago after returning home late from a meeting one evening, I turned on the television and received quite an education. I was introduced to a bunch of burly hulks wearing strange outfits and having names like Snake, the Terminator, and - of course - the Hulk. They proceeded to jump into the ring, and before I knew it, bodies were flying all over the canvas - and sometimes, outside of the canvas. There was a frenzy of body-crunching blows, and full body slams initiated from the top ropes of the ring. There were brain-wrenching headlocks and ... well, you get the picture. It seemed that any one of their actions would have landed a lesser mortal either into the emergency ward or into the morgue. But this was *Professional Wrestling*, where the contestants have perfected the art of play-acting.

The Apostle Paul tells us about another wrestling match that is going on at the present time. But there is no play-acting in this match. It is a vicious, deadly fight ... a fight for the souls of men and women! Please turn with me to the sixth chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Ephesians, chapter 6, beginning with verse 10. Hear God's unchanging Word.

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. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish 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. 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 6:10-20; NIV) This is God's Word.

The book of Ephesians is addressed to a group of believers who are rich beyond measure in Christ Jesus, but who are still living as beggars because they are ignorant of all Christ has done for them. The Apostle Paul, sizing up the situation in Ephesus, begins his letter to the Ephesians by telling them what they have received in Christ. In Christ, they are adopted into God's family. Through Christ they are accepted by God. In Christ they have forgiveness of their sins, the wisdom of God, citizenship in God's kingdom- in short, every spiritual blessing. In fact, declares Paul, the Christian has all the resources needed for living life *"to the praise of the glory of [God's] grace."*

And even though the Christian has been provided with every resource needed to live a life pleasing to God, even though the Christian is blessed *"with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ"*(1:3), life is not a cakewalk. Paul reminds us that living for God in these days is nothing less than combat. This is not a little arm-wrestling match, nor the play-acting of professional wrestling. No, our warfare is something straight out of Starship Galactica. The forces we are up against are huge.

Beneath surface appearances an unseen battle is raging. The devil and his cohorts - the principalities and powers - are doing everything in their power to frustrate God's plan. Is God's plan to create a new society? Then they will do everything to destroy it. Has God through Jesus Christ broken down the various racial and cultural walls dividing human beings? The devil and his emissaries will strive to rebuild them. Does God intend his reconciled and redeemed people to live together in harmony and purity? Then the powers of hell will scatter among them the seeds of disharmony and sin.

We wish that we could spend our lives in undisturbed peace, among our loved-ones at home and in the fellowship of God's people. But Paul reminds us of the devilish plots that have been hatched in the pit of hell. And so we face the prospect of conflict with God's enemy and therefore our enemy.

Unlike many people today, the Ephesians knew all too well about the evil spirits which tormented people. It was in Ephesus that the seven sons of Sceva, a Jew, attempted to drive out evil spirits by invoking the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed (see Acts 19:13f). They had this little ritual where they would say, *"In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out."* The evil spirit, speaking through the possessed man, said, *"Jesus I know and Paul I know, but who are you?"* The seven sons received such a beating from the possessed man that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

The forces arrayed against us, says Paul, have three main characteristics. **First, they are powerful.** They are the world rulers of this present darkness. While they have been conquered through Christ's death and resurrection, they have not yet conceded defeat or been destroyed. So they continue to exercise considerable power.

Dr. Frank Kline was a professor of Biblical Studies at Seattle Pacific University. But prior to that time he was president of Union Bible Seminary in India. On one occasion, he visited the village home of a new convert to share in the joyous service of cleansing the home of its former idols. He was chosen to be the one to enter the house and bring the idols outside.

The Indian pastor instructed him, *"Call on the name of Jesus, hold your Bible in your hand before you, and go in and bring out the idols."* This was an entirely new experience for Frank. With the Bible at his side and forgetting to use Jesus' name, he started toward the door of the house. To his amazement, at a certain point he was stopped by an unseen power. Try as he would, Frank, who was a big and strong man, could not advance another step.

"Hold your Bible before you, Frank, and use the name of Jesus!" the native pastor called out. Suddenly realizing the seriousness of Satan's power against him, Frank held out his Bible before him and, in Jesus' name, walked right into the house and brought out the idols.

Secondly, they are wicked. Power in itself is neutral. It can be well-used or misused. But our spiritual enemies use their power destructively rather than constructively; for evil rather than for good. Darkness is their habitat, and they hate the light. They are utterly unscrupulous, and they fight dirty. They recognize no Geneva Convention to restrict the weapons of their warfare.

The **thirdly, they are cunning.** Paul speaks of the devil's schemes. The devil seldom attacks openly, preferring darkness to light. But when he transforms himself into an angel of light, we are caught unsuspecting. He is a dangerous wolf, but enters Christ's flock in the disguise of a sheep. Sometimes he roars like a lion, but more often he is as subtle as a snake. He prefers to seduce us into compromise and deceive us into error.

Martin Luther, in his marvelous hymn *"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,"* writes about this in these words: *"For still our ancient foe, doth seek to work us woe - His craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate, on earth is not His equal."* Yes, the principalities and powers are strong, and we are in no position to deal with them. In no position, that is, unless we have been raised from the death of sin and are *"in Christ."* Again, Luther's hymn is helpful in this matter. *"Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing, were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He."*

In verses 13 to 17, Paul tells us how we can stand against the onslaught of our mortal enemy. We do it by putting on the full armor of God for protection. On another occasion we looked at length at this armor. But as a reminder we list them once more: God's truth; a right standing with God; the Good News of peace found in Christ; a vital faith which shields one from the flaming arrows of the thoughts of doubt and disobedience, rebellion, lust, anger and fear; the hope we have in God's saving work; and the only piece of armor which we can use not only for defense, but also for attack - the Word of God.

And finally, **Paul adds prayer to the list, not because he thinks of prayer as another - though unnamed - weapon, but because it is to pervade all our spiritual warfare.** Equipping ourselves with God's armor is not a mechanical operation. Rather, it is an expression of our dependence upon God shown as we prayerfully put on each piece of armor.

How are we to pray? Paul gives us four "universals" for Christian prayer. These are highlighted by the word *"all"*. We are to pray on **all** occasions [or at all times] (both regularly and constantly), pray with **all** kinds of prayers and requests (prayer takes many forms), pray with **all** perseverance or alertness, and pray for **all** God's people.

Jesus himself emphasized the need for alertness in our praying. *"Watch and pray,"* Jesus urged

his disciples. It was their failure to obey this order that led to the disciples falling away from Jesus at the garden of Gethsemane. It is by prayer that we wait on the Lord and renew our strength. Without prayer there is no way we can stand up to the forces of evil.

Anytime we choose to live out our lives as salt and light in our society ... anytime we seek to rescue people from Satan's domain, know that you will be up for a fight. As Frank Kline found out, Satan is not easily going to give up his captives. And as our New Testament lesson told us, some things can happen only by prayer (Mark 9:29).

As I said last week at the beginning of this series on prayer, you will be given various assignments in prayer. This first assignment is to start a **Prayer Notebook**. This assignment is to go until Palm Sunday (that's 11 weeks). Why a prayer notebook? Because often we think about praying, often we think about a problem, and we may even worry about a concern we have. But do we pray? This exercise is to help move us beyond fretting and worrying and thinking to actually praying. Be specific in your prayer notebook. In a section marked "confession," you may want to ask God to change your life in a certain area. In a section marked "petition" list those areas where you are attempting to discern God's will for you or a specific request that you have. In a section marked "intercession," list specific prayers for others. List the date when you made your request, and leave space to list the date when the prayer was answered. For example, under the area of "petition," among other things, you can pray for me your pastor the same prayer Paul requested of his Ephesian friends, namely, *"that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel."*

Keeping a **Prayer Notebook** is a little bit like a ritual we had in the Wiest household. Every Christmas and every birthday (until their 18th birthday) I would mark my sons' heights on a growth chart located on the back of one of the bedroom doors. When they were a year older, they weren't aware that they had grown much until they saw the marks and could compare their heights with the earlier marks. In much the same way, keeping a **Prayer Notebook** allows you to experience the thrill of watching how God is helping you grow in your faith. George Mueller kept a prayer notebook that he called *"God's dealings with George Mueller."* In this notebook are recorded over **50,000** specific answers to prayer. That is an average of 2 answers a day for 68 years!! Do you think James was right when he said, *"You do not have, because you do not ask God?"* (4:2).

Are you ready for this adventure in prayer? I'll ask next week how many have started their notebook. As we close, I leave you with the words of the Apostle Paul: *"The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ"* (2 Corinthians 10:4,5). AMEN.