

- ***READ Ephesians 6:10-13*** The struggle certainly is real. The struggle...the fight...the war for our souls is raging. It is good versus evil. It is God versus the devil, and Paul wants us well aware of this current reality so that we might make preparations to be on the winning side. The key to being on the winning side is found in **v.13** when Paul instructs us to *"take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm."* We can stand firm and resist the devil, but that result only comes through growing mightily and prevailing in our faiths. We will only be able to stand firm if our roots have been firmly planted and well established.
- This theme of growing mightily and prevailing has been our major focus for this year, and while this might not be a first Sunday morning of the month, I still want us to take some time to focus on this all important aspect of our faith...growth. The growth that we experience in our faiths cannot be understated or underappreciated. Growth is what takes us from that point of spiritual infancy to the point of us being spiritual warriors who are on the front line battling against Satan and his forces of darkness and wickedness. In the following verses we see Paul mentioning different weapons and tools that make up the full armor of God that will help us to prevail in this battle. Truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, and the Word of God are all valuable weapons in this battle against Satan and his wicked desires for us.
- In addition to these things, there are some other tools that can specifically aid us when it comes to our growing and prevailing in our faiths. Zeal, conviction, and strong leadership play integral roles in our faith growing and progressing as it should. Being zealous, having a burning passion for our God will cause us to seek growth all the more. Being convicted and fully convinced of God's will for me in my life, and allowing God to have the first place in all things will put me on the right road towards growth and victory. Having someone of wisdom and courage to help lead me on that path can only aid me in finding success.
- However...Satan also knows the value of these things. He knows the value of zeal, conviction, and strong leadership. He knows that a disciple who possesses such things will be a strong opponent, and he would much rather weaken us so we are easier to overcome. He is crafty and will use any means necessary in order to cause us to be an easier victory for himself. Would you notice that the first mention of the armor of God is made in reference to standing firm against the *"schemes of the devil."* (**Ephesians 6:11**) Satan will use whatever means necessary in order to weaken our resolve against himself. If he knows that zeal, conviction, and strong leadership will help us to stand firm, then wouldn't it make sense that he would try to use his own weapons against us? I certainly think this is the case. While we are trying to put on the armor of God so that we can grow and prevail, Satan is trying to deploy growth killers so that our spiritual health will be weakened to the point that we become easy to defeat. I'd like to take a few minutes this morning to identify 4 specific growth killers that are used by Satan to deter us from growing mightily and prevailing. Each and every one of us are at risk for having these evil weapons used against us, and we must know our enemy and his schemes if we want to be able to stand firm against that which opposes us.

I. Apathy

A. The apathetic disciple has no zeal or passion for God.

1. I think the best examples of this type of Christian (unfortunately they come in the setting of an entire congregation) are found in John's Revelation in the churches of Ephesus (**Revelation 2:1-4**) and Laodicea (**Revelation 3:14-16**). The disciples in Ephesus were rebuked for having left their "first love." I don't know about you, but I see that as a statement that their passion and fervor for God had diminished to where they were just existing without having much zeal. I can see the same type of atmosphere present in Laodicea where Jesus says that they were lukewarm. They had become complacent and saw themselves as just fine where they were.

2. These types of disciples are useless for the cause of Christ because they don't care enough about the Lord to give effort to produce fruit, and the Lord will eventually cast them off. I think these words of Jesus in Revelation were a warning that very thing was coming. In **John 15:1,2**, Jesus states that He is the true vine, and His Father is the vinedresser and, *"every branch in me that does not bear fruit, He takes away."*
 3. Satan knows the extreme damage that can be done when apathy and complacency takes hold within the heart of the disciple of Jesus. He knows the apathetic Christian will have no zeal or passion for holiness and righteousness. He knows the apathetic Christian will do just enough to get by so that no one will give him any sort of trouble. He knows Christian certainly won't go out of his way to grow in his faith, especially if it requires a true amount of work and effort. What a dangerous place to be for the disciple, but it is exactly where Satan wants us!
- B. We can and must overcome apathy by recognizing the serious nature of the battle for our souls.**
1. I don't believe Paul would've used the terms of war that he did in Ephesians 6 unless he saw the situation being that serious. Certainly the situation is serious! We're talking about the condition of our souls and those around us. If we can truly grasp within our minds that souls hang in the balance and that God demands our best efforts at all times, then I don't believe we will ever find a time where we will be able to allow ourselves to become apathetic.
 2. We must always remember that growth demands diligent effort (**II Peter 1:5-11**). We must never allow for our past faith and accomplishments to lead us to think that we can put things in cruise control. When we get into cruise control then we tend to relax and not pay as much attention, right? When we do that...we are ripe for the taking in the eyes of Satan. We must stand firm and resist him, and we can do so by constantly being alert and on guard in our faith. We can do that by being zealous for our God and always giving our best effort to please Him.

II. Misplaced Priorities

A. Satan wants disciples to grow in every other area of life besides faith.

1. Did you happen to notice the next verse back in **Revelation 3**? We read **vv.14-16**, but I want for us to now notice **vv.17-19**. Notice that there was something that seems to have led to their apathetic mindset, and that was their wealth. They had become lukewarm, and they had determined that they were now rich and had *"need of nothing."* They had become apathetic towards Him because they felt as if they didn't need Him for anything.
2. Those who are rich and wealthy will often quickly tell you that they didn't obtain their wealth easily, but it took hard work to get to where they are in their financial state. Unfortunately, that effort often comes at the expense of effort that could have put in towards spiritual things. If we love this world and the things of this world. If our hearts are set on this world and we are enamored by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life...then what time is there left over for us to give God the attention and dedication that he truly deserves? (**I John 2:15-17**)
3. The truth is that Satan knows that a disciple who is so wrapped up in this world to the degree that his heart is set on the world...will not be a difficult opponent to conquer. The reality is that this person has already been conquered. They have already been defeated because instead of putting on the full armor of God and making spiritual preparations, they have only filled their pockets with material wealth that will hinder them from escaping the clutches of Satan. Instead of seeking to grow in wisdom and faith, they only seek to grow in the size of their bank account. Earthly wealth is fun and we can find great joy in the things it allows for us to do, but it provides our souls no protection from the evil one. If the only thing standing between us and the enemy is a pile of cash then we are nothing but a sitting duck ready to be destroyed along with this world that we have shown that we love so much.

B. We must remember and be convinced that only a true love for God which leads us to grow in our faiths can lead us to life.

1. John gives the alternative to a love for this world in **II John 2:17** when he writes, *"the one who does the will of God lives forever."* This is set up to counteract the tragic news that those who love the world and its lusts will pass away with it. Who are those who do the will of God? They are those who love God from their very souls. They are those who see the need to grow in their faiths so they can stand firm against the enemy Satan.
2. Does this mean that we cannot have any sort of wealth? I would sure hope not because they would mean all of us here would be in trouble. Compared to 99% of the world we are all extremely wealthy, but it does mean that we should take to heart the commands of Paul in **I Timothy 6:17-19**. We should all be sure that our hope is not fixed on this world, but that we only hope in God who is the one who supplies the good things we enjoy. We should use our wealth to do good to all people and to help those in need. In doing so, Paul says that we will be laying a solid foundation for the future. I would suggest this is strongly akin to what Jesus says about storing up for ourselves riches in heaven from **Matthew 6:19,20**. Our priorities must remain true to God. We have mentioned wealth specifically, but we must make sure that nothing takes our hope and hearts away from God; not our families, jobs, hobbies, or anything else. He and things of a spiritual nature must always take precedence in our lives.

III. Excuses

A. Excuses are convenient "explanations" for why we aren't growing.

1. Satan, the father of lies (**John 8:44**), is very good at getting within our heads and helping us to think that our failure to grow is someone else's fault. This is a genius tactic and scheme because it takes all of the responsibility off of our shoulders when it comes to spiritual growth. For starters, we never begin to grow because our minds are filled with all of these excuses as to why we will be unsuccessful in our efforts to grow.
 - a) *"I have temptations I just can't kick..."*
 - b) *"I'll never be able to live up to God's expectations for me..."*
 - c) *"I'm doing this all by myself..."*
 - d) *"I'm just a kid...I should be able to have fun and do what I want right now..."*
 - e) *"I'm not as good as _____ at _____ so I might as well just not do anything..."*
 - f) *"My family demands so much of my time..."*
2. These are all excuses that hinder us from giving great effort to grow in our faiths and live up to the standard of excellence that God demands from each of us. These are excuses that Satan loves for us to tell ourselves so we will die in our faith instead of grow and thrive.
3. These are the types of excuses that Moses tried to use on God when he was called to go lead Israel out of captivity in Egypt. Moses knew that doing this particular thing God was asking would be difficult, and he tried his best to wiggle out of it by offering up excuse after excuse. (**Exodus 4**) First he worries about the people not listening to him. Then he worries about his lack of eloquent speech. Finally, he tries to offer up his brother Aaron as an alternative to him as the messenger. God finally tells him to have some confidence because He would be with Him at all times, and He would strengthen him to get the job done. Satan knows this, but doesn't want us to know it. He would much rather us just use excuse after excuse to leave ourselves weak and vulnerable to the attacks that he will throw upon us. We must be better than some lame excuses.

B. We must take personal responsibility to lean upon the Lord and grow in our faiths.

1. The truth is that we must do from the start what Moses failed to see. We must see the power of our God and remember that our standing firm in Him will lead us to victory. It is His strength and Might that will help us to be victorious. If we refuse to lean upon him, and instead seek to lean upon our excuses for failure then we will never see the victory.
2. This isn't to say that we don't have legitimate things that make our lives more difficult. Paul had such a thing in his thorn in the flesh. Do you remember that he actually called that thing a messenger of Satan? What do you think that message was? I'm thinking that it was a message of hopelessness. It was a message constantly reminding Paul that he wasn't strong and that he had weaknesses. God finally tells him that He must remember that his leaning upon the Lord for strength in those moments of weakness would only show him just how strong His God was! **(II Corinthians 12:7-10)** Satan knows the power of our God, but he would much rather us focus on all of the excuses we can come up with so that we can be easier to defeat.

IV. Poor Leadership

A. Everything rises and falls on leadership.

1. From the beginning, we see leadership being the key to success or failure. We often assumed that Adam failed to protect Eve from the temptations of the serpent. Noah led his family to safety. Lot almost failed his entire family by planting them in Sodom. The judges and kings of Israel were nearly always at the epicenter of the nation's successes or failures. Time and time again throughout the Scriptures we see the importance of leadership.
2. One of the most humbling portions of the Bible in regards to the responsibility of leaders is found in **Ezekiel 34:1-10**. In this text God, through Ezekiel, comes down hard upon those who were the shepherds of Israel. These were the men who served in positions of leadership among the Jewish people. They were quickly told of their failures. They had been selfish in their actions. They had only provided for themselves. They had not cared for the needs of those who were underneath them. They had killed the spiritual vitality of God's people. They had created an environment in which growth could not be present.
3. This is exactly what Satan wanted for the chosen people of God. He wanted for the leaders to be selfish. He wanted for them to be unaware of the dangers that were surrounding the people. He didn't want for the leaders to be forward thinking or aware, but instead he wanted them to just grow fat and happy. When leadership is faulty and failing, how can we expect for there to be growth and success?

B. Those of us in leadership positions must step up and lead well so others can reach their full potential.

1. There are many people here this morning who are not elders or deacons, but we are still spiritual leaders. The husbands, dads, moms, and the older men and women...we all have a great responsibility to lead those who are under us towards great spiritual growth and success. Husbands are to care for their wives and lead them as fellow heirs of righteousness. **(I Peter 3:7)** Parents are to lead and instruct their children in the ways of the Lord and to lead them to love the Lord their God. **(Deuteronomy 6:1-9 & Ephesians 6:4)** The older men and women are to teach and instruct the younger men and women to be godly in their character and behavior. **(Titus 2:2-5)**
2. Of course, there are those who are in leadership positions within this church, and I believe we are all working towards providing every opportunity for the people of this church to grow. There is so much planning that goes into the work that we are trying to achieve here from the classes to our guest speakers and other growth opportunities, and these opportunities don't need to be wasted by any of us. Satan would much rather that poor leadership be present, but it is up to each of us to make sure that isn't the case, and it is up to each of us to not let strong leadership go to waste.

Satan is crafty and he is persistent. He wants nothing more than for us to fail to grow so that we will be easy prey for him to devour. We must all be on guard constantly against these evil attacks so that we can overcome and grow strong in our spiritual fortitude. May God be with us as we seek to grow mightily and prevail, especially as we face these growth killers set upon us by the evil one.

PRAYER *Our loving Father...we are so thankful for the protection that you provide for us against Satan and his many schemes. We pray that you would help each of us to establish strong roots in Your power and might so we will be able to resist him at all times. Help us to overcome evil with goodness and righteousness. Help us to show how much we love you each and every day as we strive to grow in our spiritual maturity. Strengthen us with your mighty hand. Help us to be zealous and convicted. Help us as leaders to lead well to Your glory. When this war ends, we pray and hope that we will find ourselves on the victorious side. We pray that we will find ourselves on Your side because of the strength you have provided to us. May You push each of us to growth and victory. We ask these things in the name of Your Son, Jesus the Christ...amen.*