

Why is the Service So Hard?

[Ephesians 6:10-20](#)

Discipleship Essentials - Part Four: Serving Christ

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, July 1, 2007

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

It has been historically true since the beginning of the Church—going all the way back before that—to the people of God, that one of the great metaphors that has sustained the people of God for difficult times is a metaphor: that we are at war. We are warriors in a tough and difficult world. Today we are going to answer the question of why it is that this service of God is embattled...why it is so hard. One of the important focuses of this text is that the forces we are fighting with are not people; are not human beings; are not flesh and blood. They are principalities and powers in high places. With that in mind, let us ask God to have the Spirit of the Word of God now speak to us.

Let us pray. We desire to follow Jesus Christ. We realize that we are confronted in a world where we stand in the face of fire, and your Holy Spirit is with us and empowers us. May you now give us the courage of your sword, Almighty God, to hear your word and to put it into practice—to speak it from our hearts and minds. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The heart of this text are the words: to stand and to withstand. The images are that we are in a battle, and the battle is hard. It is dangerous. We are an endangered group. We are under fire. And we need to stand, not retreat.

On July 4th through 6th in 1777, during the Revolutionary War, there was an important battle (although it turned out not to be much of a battle for Fort Ticonderoga in Lake Champlain, New York). The British general John Burgoyne, with 8,000 British troops, came up against the American general Arthur St. Clair with 3,500 troops. St. Clair had Fort Ticonderoga, and Burgoyne was coming in to attack the fort. St. Clair had looked at the surrounding environment, with advice and counsel, and realized that the ridges around the fort, particularly a mountain called Sugarloaf, were probably unattainable in terms of putting cannons on top of it. So he decided not to try; and advised that it would not be doable anyway. From July 2nd through 4th, the Americans were ready for it, on the inside of Fort Ticonderoga. Meanwhile, the British were quietly winching cannons up through the trees, up to the top of Sugarloaf—doing the impossible. The Americans awoke on July 5th to discover that the British had taken the high ground with the cannons on top of it. While the British could shoot out over into the fort, the Americans could not have a cannon shoot up for the top of the mountain. St. Clair decided at that point he needed to leave the fort and save his men. That departure from the fort became a battle cry for the rest of the war. It was appalling to the Congress that a general would abandon the fort, a key defense for the northern colonies. St. Clair spent the rest of his life trying to explain why he did not stand in the face of fire.

A second such situation came up during the Civil War. At the first battle of Bull Run, Henry House Hill (still in support of General Bernard Bee) was under attack from the Union Army. There was Thomas Jonathan Jackson on the hill with his men. He was under attack and losing ground from the Union Army; he was calling out for Jackson to come and support him. Jackson did not come, and so Bee turned and said, "See, there is Jackson standing like a stone wall. Let us determine to die here, and we shall conquer." That was taken to be a point of affirmation, in the light of the following battle; for Jackson eventually won that battle because he did stand his ground and did not let the Union Army win.

The question for us today is whether we will stand our ground under fire. It is definitely true that we, as people of faith, are under constant fire in our culture. The call of the book of Ephesians is to be strong in the Lord Jesus Christ, to put on the whole armor of God, and pray in the Spirit always. With a powerful presence of the Trinity we are called to stand against the schemes of the Devil; to withstand on the evil day; to stand firm in the face of fire, and to put on the armor that God gives to us. It is a call that God is with us in the midst of the most difficult places. We should not turn and run. We should not turn and attack, or give in to our temptations under pressure, or to fight and to flee—but we should stand (one of the most difficult things to do when you are under attack).

Time magazine recently carried an article of what we have now learned about John Fitzgerald Kennedy in the face of the Bay of Pigs. Kennedy would often combine and brandish almost warlike speeches connecting a sense of: 1. defense... and... 2. we will protect ourselves from the enemy's arrows, with a commitment to peace at all costs. He was known for his quest for peace as a militant lawyer. In the invasion of Cuba, when the military wanted to push Kennedy to commit to going into Cuba in a warlike fashion, Kennedy stood his ground and refused. He was determined to keep the country at peace and not to risk nuclear war. He always wanted his epitaph to read: "He kept the peace." Kennedy understood that our true power comes from democratic ideals and not from military power. Now hear me loud and clear: I am not anti-military; but I believe that our history— and our country—is to use military power for the purpose of holding the peace.

That is the Gospel message: that we would use the power of God—not military power, but the power of God—to be warriors for peace. We would be soldiers for the kingdom of God. We would find strength in following Jesus, protection in the armor of God, and perseverance in praying in the Spirit. But who are we fighting against if it is not flesh and blood? It is very tempting to put a human face on our enemy. The writer of Ephesians (maybe the apostle Paul or one of his disciples) wants to make sure that we do not do that. Our target is not another human being or a crowd of human beings. No, on the contrary. A lot of time is spent in Ephesians arguing that we don't need to build ways of reconciliation between human beings, for we are fighting against the forces of evil. What are these forces of evil? Rulers in high places; authorities in the heavens; cosmic powers and forces of evil. I believe they are the things that drive human beings, beyond flesh and blood, to do things that are not right. The value systems... the patterns... the family systems... the ghosts and the fears of the past... these are the things that drive us (who were not expecting them) to do things that are not good. And who is the great evil one that is quoted here? It is the one that has historically been referred to as Satan or the Devil; the one with crafts, and wiles, and schemes; who accuses and prosecutes the people of God so that they feel not good about being the

people of God—but feel that God has abandoned or rejected them.

Ephesians lists carefully, all the way through the text, a number of things that are signs of this evil world; things we do that are patterns, that we get ourselves into, even when we do not want to: 1. Blame: when under fire, we look for the person to blame for the reason we are in the mess. If we can just find a face to name, we can blame that person for the reason why evil is getting us. 2. Abandonment: we would not be under this fire if God had stood with us in the midst of this. So, therefore, God has abandoned us. 3. Victimization: a very popular pattern in today's evil culture is, "Poor me. I am the victim of other people's abuse, and I need to be paid, or carefully rewarded, for the fact that I'm a victim." We could go on, and on, and on.

Patterns are principalities and powers... systems of thinking and behavior that haunt all of us, and haunt our culture... that cause us to reject the very nature of God. One of those things identified in Ephesians is immaturity. Immaturity is, in fact, a signal of one of the signs of the age. We like to hold onto our adolescence as long as possible. That is a principality and power and haunts all of us as Americans: Don't grow up; don't get old; don't become mature; and don't be wise. All of those things are militantly opposed in the Gospel. Another one that is haunting our world today is the pattern of vengeance: an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. The way things ought to be done is, if someone does something to you, get even. This is a principality and a power; it's a behavior pattern that haunts the world. We may do it in all sorts of subtle ways in America, versus more overtly in other parts of the world; but getting even is still a part of the human pattern.

These gods in high places that Ephesians addresses were embodied in the pantheon of the Greek and Roman gods. For example, the whole pattern of fighting war—which was considered a badge of honor for particularly men—was a part of the Greek pantheon. The God of War—Ares for the Greeks and Mars for the Romans. If you're a real man you are going to be a real soldier, and you're going to go to battle. That's not because it's necessarily a person that said that; it's because of the whole pattern of humanity that has practiced it... and believed it... and passed it on, from one generation to the next.

If this sometimes gets a little ambiguous to us and confusing, let's look at one example in the Bible where Jesus encounters a principality in power and doesn't name it as flesh and blood. It is at the moment in Caesarea, Philippi, where he is asking the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter stands up and says, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God"—a moment of breakthrough and revelation for Peter to recognize who Jesus is. But not too far after that, when Jesus said, "Because you've said this and seen it, I now must go to Jerusalem to suffer at the hands of the priests and be killed, and be raised on the third day," Peter takes him aside and says, "Lord, whatever you do, don't do that. That's a mistake." And Jesus says these words to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan." He doesn't accuse Peter of the problem; he accuses Peter of getting into the Devil's perspective of the problem. What is going on there for Peter and Jesus, is that Peter has given in to a world-mindedness about who Jesus should be: and Jesus needs to adjust his Messiah pattern to what the world expects. Messiahs don't die. They don't go to cities unprepared with military might and offer themselves as sacrifices. Messiahs win great battles with great armies. And Jesus said: you're thinking like ordinary humanity... and that's the Devil.

We are given the responsibility—as ordinary human beings, men and women—to let go of thinking like the principalities and powers... those patterns in control of our culture... and to begin to think like the Holy Spirit would guide us. That takes maturity, discernment, an intentional preparedness, and discipline. Otherwise, we will give in to the schemes of the Devil. And the schemes of the Devil are not these kinds of dark, underlying, deeply-rooted, possibly evil, things that we often think about. They are some of the normal patterns of life where God is not in our thinking. It's in our family, it's in our business, it's in a pattern of government; it's not Jesus. It's the way things are. You've often heard that expression, "That's just the way things are." When you hear that, you'd better be prepared to name it as potentially the voice of evil; because the way things are is not the way things should be, if God is in control and the Kingdom of God is present.

So Ephesians spends a lot of time calling the people of God into God's presence: fight in the presence of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Fight with the weapons of faith and resurrection power. Believe in your life that Jesus has been raised from the dead, and you, too, will be raised from the dead; and, therefore, you do not have to fear death like other people do. Not only has Jesus been raised from the dead, but Jesus has been raised to the highest place in eternity—above all powers, authorities and rulers. The implication is clear that there is no military governmental strength more powerful than Jesus. Live like it! Jesus is greater than all. God is rich in mercy. There is great love being poured out in Jesus Christ. God keeps promises; shares the commonwealth with his people; reconciles people who are cut off from each other; brings peace; gives access to the very presence of God; breaks down walls; grants heavenly citizenship; and makes saints. That is the way of God.

And how do we implement it? Ephesians says that we implement it with a sense of our own humility, but with boldness; with a complete life of prayer; of gentleness and patience; of commitment to unity and not being broken out and down; putting away the old patterns and the old way of thinking, and taking on a new pattern and a new way of thinking. To speak the truth when it's tempting to lie; to work honestly when it's tempting to steal; to share with the poor when we would like to hold it for ourselves. Or, as the summary is given to us, "To put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of doing the right thing, wearing the shoes of proclaiming peace in the Gospel, a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation, and a sword of the Word of God." Those are the tools. And they are not the typical tools that we would normally fight life with in this world.

There are two great human temptations in the face of fire that would prevent us from standing. One is to fight and kill the enemy—to kill other human beings that have gotten in our way. Another is to flee and run away, saying, "I'm out of here." It was on that night when Jesus was at the table with his disciples that both of those were experienced. Jesus stood at the table and sat with the disciples, and shared the meal in the face of knowing that he was under fire. He did not fight. He did not flee. And by example, he teaches us that God prepares the table in the presence of our enemies; we should sit there... and stand there... and be people of faith in the face of fire.

Life can be tragic and traumatic, difficult and painful. It's too easy to lash out, or to leave. I was talking with a couple last week who were wrestling with both sides of that in their marriage. One wants to attack; and the other wants to leave. So it goes in most of our

long-term marriages. And what does God say in the midst of this? To be people of faith; to stand, and put on the armor of God.

I learned that not too long ago, in the midst of a huge tragedy; it was a church tragedy. I was under fire; or I was under fire, for I was endangered. Here are some things about what the Spirit does when we stand. The Spirit taught me to move toward the conflict, not away from it; to engage and not disengage; to pray at all times. And sometimes the only prayer I could pray was, "Lord, have mercy." They weren't long prayers or more detailed prayers; they were just prayers, "God, be with me in the midst of this mess." And I often heard God's voice, "Stand and don't run. Stand and don't attack. Don't play the victim and don't make other people your victims. If you are going to complain, complain to God; don't gossip and complain to other people. Accept responsibility for how you contributed to this mess. Speak the truth and take a good look at yourself, for I am with you. Become a person of good courage." That is the warrior present, in the midst of the fight. Jesus said to God, 'It's not my will, but yours. If you will, please let this cup pass from me—this cup of suffering, and confrontation, and death; but it's not my will, but yours.' It is the call of God in the Gospel, and in the book of Ephesians—when we are in the face of fire, to come and be with Jesus, and with Jesus' people at the table... surrounded by darkness, and by pain, difficulty, and tragedy. Come and sit; and then stand.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, teach us now—as we share the body and blood that you've offered to us—not to attack, nor flee, but to have you stand with us; empowered by your Spirit to be warriors of peace in the midst of a world that is full of destruction. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.