



Striving against Satan

Building an Attacking Offense

“Take ... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.”

Ephesians 6:17b-18

In January of 2002, when I returned to my flat after lecturing on the doctrine of salvation in an eastern European country, I was assaulted by two men who knocked me down, tied and gagged me, and ran a knife up and down my back, all the while shouting, “Mafia, mafia!” God graciously spared me and comforted me immeasurably with His Word throughout this 45 minute ordeal, but you can understand that I considered myself a dead man.

The Mafia is not always blatantly or aggressively open, however. More often than not, they, like Satan, run a camouflaged organization and operation. Do you know the addresses of Mafia leaders? Do you recognize them beneath their business suits and their apparently legitimate businesses? We know that the Mafia controls money-laundering businesses, various rings of prostitution, and all kinds of crime, but it is difficult to pin them down. I read recently that one of the Mafia’s leaders was so slippery that, although there were more than a dozen charges against him, the jury acquitted him and he will soon be set free.

Satan’s spiritual Mafia controls people and nations — sometimes openly and blatantly, but more often in camouflage. We need much wisdom and strength not only to defend ourselves against his attacks, but also to offensively search him out and go on the attack in the strength of our God. Ephesians 6:17b-18 tells us how to do that, presenting us with three powerful weapons in our battle against the archenemy of our Savior.

The Sword of the Spirit

The sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (6:17b) is a unique piece of armor in fighting Satan, for it attacks the enemy as well as repels him. God magnifies His Word by using it as a double-edged sword (Heb. 4:12). The Holy Spirit, the author of God’s “breathed-out” Word, enables us to interpret and use this Word. Here is how the sword of the Spirit can be used to combat Satan:

1. It is a defense against Satan. Jesus sets the example here. He responded each time to Satan’s temptations in the desert with *“It is written”* (Matt. 4:1-11). His words from Scripture plunged like steel into the heart of Satan. That is how we, too, need to respond to Satan. Hand-to-hand combat with Satan and with temptation seldom works. We need the sword of the Spirit in our hand.

Satan cannot defeat a believer who by faith wields the promises of the Bible. Faith trusts in the promises of God. When Satan says, “You will one day fall at my hand,” faith says, “No,” and lifts up the Word of God as a sword, saying, *“I am persuaded that he that hath begun a good work in me will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ”* (cf. Phil. 1:6). When Satan hurls the doubt, “Your sin is too great,” faith responds by saying, *“He is able also to save to the uttermost them that come unto God by him”* (Heb. 7:25). For every dart of Satan, God has provided a

sure defense in His Word. *“The only way to overcome Satan,”* Calvin wrote, *“is by keeping to the Word of God in its entirety.”*

2. It is an offensive weapon against Satan. We fight Satan by finding shelter in Christ. We fight him with an unyielding defense. But we also fight Satan by taking the offense against him. The sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, gives us clear directions, powerful motives, rich encouragements, and instructive examples that equip us well for confronting Satan.

Do not live by bread alone, but by every word of God. Intimately acquaint yourself with the Bible by studying and memorizing it daily. That will help keep God’s sword sharp in your hand. Keep that sword polished and bright by living the Bible’s truths each day. Keep the sword ready at all times through constant prayer. Speak out; bear witness to Scripture truth. Carry the light of God’s Word into a dark world, shining its light into every dark corner.

In dependence on the Spirit, use the sword of the Bible to stand your ground against Satan, to assail him, to run at him, to rout him, and to drive him from the field. Have confidence in the Word of God. It will never fail you, not even in the thick of battle with Satan (Apollyon), as Bunyan so poignantly tells of Christian while in the valley of humiliation:

But as God would have it, while Apollyon was fetching his last blow, thereby to make a full end of this good man, Christian nimbly stretched forth his hand for his sword, and caught it, saying, “Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: when I fall I shall arise”; and with that gave him a deadly thrust, which made him give back, as one that had received his mortal wound. Christian, perceiving that, made at him again, saying, “Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.” And with that Apollyon spread forth his dragon wings, and sped him away.

Praying in the Spirit

“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit” (6:18a). Prayer is the second offensive weapon against Satan. Martin Luther said, *“Prayer is a strong wall and fortress of the church; it is a goodly Christian’s weapon.”* John Bunyan said, *“The greatest weapon in the storehouse of God is the weapon of prayer.”*

Prayer is critical because every piece of Christian armor is useless without it. Prayer is like oil; just as every part of an engine is useless without oil, so every part of Christian warfare is vain without prayer. Fighting Satan without prayer is like David fighting Goliath in Saul’s armor. The armor doesn’t fit, and it is ineffective against the blows of the enemy.

In withstanding Satan through prayer, Paul tells us to do the following:

1. Pray always

Some generations ago, several ministers gathered in the Scottish highlands to discuss what it meant to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). After considerable discussion, one minister asked a little maid girl if she knew what it meant.

“Yes, sir,” she said. “As I arose this morning from bed, I prayed that the Sun of righteousness would arise with healing in His wings over me today. When I got dressed, I prayed that I might be clothed with Christ’s righteousness. As I dusted the furniture in this room before you arrived, I prayed that the Lord would wipe my heart clean through the blood of Jesus. When I made your refreshments ready, I prayed that Jesus Christ would be my food and drink. Sir, I pray my way through each day, for prayer is my breath, my life.”

Praying without ceasing means praying at set times and seasons as well as sending up short petitions to God throughout the day. It means praying at stated times of prayer and praying whenever you feel the least impulse to do so. Praying is more important than whatever else you are doing. Spurgeon said, *“We must addict ourselves to prayer.”*

2. Pray with prayer and supplication

Though Paul appears to be repeating himself in Ephesians 6:18, he is not. Paul is saying, “Pray with heartfelt, pleading prayer. Truly pray in your prayer.” Tragically, we often fail miserably in using the weapon of prayer. Satan can doze beside our prayerless prayers.

The marginal notes on James 5:17 in the King James Version of the Bible say that Elijah “*prayed in his prayer.*” That means the prophet truly prayed with all his heart. Samuel Rutherford said that the condition of the heart in prayer is more important than the words that are said. He wrote, “*A dumb beggar gets more when he can’t talk than when he can. Tears have a tongue, a grammar, and a language that the Lord can understand better than words.*” Bunyan put it this way, “*It is better when thou prayest, to rather let thy heart be without words, than thy words without heart.*”

3. Pray with all prayer

That means praying while acknowledging God in all your ways and trusting that He will direct all your paths (Prov. 3:5–6). Bring all your needs to God, great and small. As Mary Winslow told her son, “*Tell the Lord everything about you, as if He knew nothing about you, yet knowing that He knows all things.*” Entrust yourself and all of your needs into God’s all-sufficient hands, if you would defeat Satan in things small and large.

4. Pray in the Spirit

Romans 8:26 says that the Holy Spirit helps us to pray in our infirmities and intercedes for us with groanings that cannot be uttered. The Holy Spirit shows us how miserable we are by nature and how great our debt is to God. The Spirit also enables us to think saving thoughts of God, of Christ, and of blessed things. He grants us faith and helps us express our needs and thoughts in prayer. He keeps us from hypocrisy, coldness, and all that is unseemly.

Let me illustrate how the Holy Spirit does this. A small boy was being taught by his father how to steer a ship. As the boy began to steer, his father stood directly behind him. The father knew that if he didn’t help his son, the boat would crash on the rocks or be swept away in the swift current. The father did not push his son aside, though, telling him it would be better for the father to take the helm. He leaned over his son, put his hands upon his son’s hands, then guided his son’s hands on the wheel. Through the father’s guidance the son steered the ship to safety.

Likewise, my friends, we pray best when the Spirit grips our hearts and guides our thoughts, steering us in the course that He has charted for us. Just as this boy could not steer the ship on his own, so we cannot pray rightly without the Holy Spirit. Let us have confidence in Him and seek to be filled with Him (Eph. 5:18).

Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, “*Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer.*” If you desire to pray in the Spirit to fight Satan, do the following:

- Lean on Christ. In Him all prayer is made effective.
- Make prayer a priority. Bunyan said, “*You can do more than pray after you’ve prayed, but you can’t do more than pray until you’ve prayed.*”
- Find sweetness in prayer. When I was nine years old, my Dad told me, “Always remember that a true believer has a place to go — the throne of grace. Prayer is God’s gift to go to Himself. He is a prayer-giving, a prayer-hearing, and a prayer-answering God.”
- Repeat God’s promises. God is the tender of His own Word. Take Him at His Word. He will make prayer effective for you.

Watch with Perseverance

“Watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints” (6:18b). The true soldier must stand guard at his post; he must be vigilant, watchful, and alert. Likewise, the soldier of Christ must watch and pray to ward off the attacks of Satan.

Paul brings praying and watching together in one verse (6:18b) because they are inseparable. Our day often goes poorly because we have failed to begin it in heartfelt prayer. We also pray poorly as we retire in the evening because we haven't been watchful through the day. *“Watch and pray,”* Jesus said (Matt. 26:41).

The devil loves to work with drowsy Christians. The foolish virgins missed welcoming the Bridegroom because their lamps ran out of oil. In *Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan's Christian lost his roll, symbolizing his assurance of faith, when he fell asleep.

We can defeat Satan only if we watch and pray. We do this by:

- *Being constantly aware.* We must be aware of what is going on in our hearts and in the hearts of our family and our home. We must be aware of the needs of our church and the children of God. We must be aware of the needs of our city, state, and nation. We must be aware of what is happening in the government and world affairs. We must broaden our sense of awareness, for that will give us more material for intercession.
- *Interceding for others.* We should pray for ministers and the progress of the gospel. Paul pleads for that in verses 19-20. We should also make *“supplication for all saints”* (v. 18b). We are never more like Christ than when we are engaged in heartfelt intercession. T. J. Bach said that many of us cannot reach the mission field on our feet, but we can reach it on our knees. Intercession delivers us from selfishness, which Satan so delights to see; it lifts us above ourselves, gives us joy in service, and enables us to keep Satan at bay.
- *Persevering.* The Greek word used here for perseverance means to pursue until you get your prey. Press on as you watch, remembering that *“In due season we shall reap if we faint not”* (Gal. 6:9). Keep knocking on the door of God's grace. Don't leave after one knock, like a disheartened salesman. Be like Mercy in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, who kept knocking to the point of fainting until God answered her. Watch for God's answers. Do not turn your back on Him.
- *Watching in all things.* That is what Paul commanded Timothy (2 Tim. 4:5). Obey the calling: *“Let everyone that nameth the name of Christ, depart from iniquity”* (2 Tim. 2:19). As E. M. Bounds writes, *“‘Watch’ is the keynote of safety (We must be) wide awake not only when we see his form and fear his presence, but wide awake to see him when he is not to be seen, to repel him when he comes in any one of his ten thousands guises or disguises — this is our wise and safe course”* (*Satan: His Personality, Power and Overthrow*, p. 144).

Stand Up for Jesus

Paul's well-outfitted soldier in Ephesians 6:14-18 gives us a comprehensive picture of how to fight against Satan. In dependency on the Spirit, and in Christ's strength, use each piece of armor prayerfully every day, remembering what Samuel Rutherford said: *“Satan is only God's master fencer to teach us to use our weapons.”* Don't let any pieces of God's weaponry hang in the back of your closet unused. You need every one. Trust God to help you; don't lean upon your own understanding. As Calvin warned, *“If we contend with Satan according to our own view of things, he will a hundred times overwhelm us and we will never be able to resist.”*

As a believer in Christ, put your spiritual warfare into Christ's hands. Remember that ultimately the battle against Satan is not yours but His (2 Chron. 20:15). Jesus Christ will not lose the battle against the Prince of this world. You are part of His body, the church, and He will not relinquish His bride.

Take heart, soldier. Your comforts are many. You are in a strong position, being “in Christ.” You have all the equipment you need — the whole armor of God. You have the help of a Master Warrior, David’s own Teacher and Guide, the Holy Spirit (Pss. 18, 144). He makes the devil be your “*polisher, while he intends to be (your) destroyer,*” wrote Stephen Charnock. You have the promise of help in the evil day and victory guaranteed at the last day. You are on the winning side; ultimately, as William Gurnall wrote, “*God sets the devil to catch himself.*” You may lose some skirmishes to Satan, but through Christ Jesus, you will win the war.

*Stand up, stand up for Jesus;
Stand in His strength alone.
The arm of flesh will fail you,
You dare not trust your own.
Put on the gospel armor,
Each piece put on with prayer.
Where duty calls or danger,
Be never wanting there.*

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