

A Special Message –

“America’s Real Problem: You Won’t Hear This at a Tea Party Rally” (Ephesians 6:10-13)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/27 and 7/4/2010 (in two parts)

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Dr. Elliott preached this sermon at First Presbyterian Church (ERPC) in Rising Sun, Maryland on May 30, 2010, the day before the United States’ Memorial Day. We believe this message is appropriate not only for our American listeners as we remember Independence Day (July 4th) but also for our listeners around the world, since all believers in Christ are engaged in the same spiritual warfare. What follows is a transcript of the entire sermon.

Before we look into the Lord’s Word this morning, let’s look to the Lord in prayer once again. Father, we thank you that we have the privilege and the opportunity to look into Your Word this morning. We pray that as we do so, that the Author, the Holy Spirit, would be our guide and our teacher, because we know that we can learn nothing that is true unless we learn it from You, and unless You teach us. We pray that You would do that this morning, and that You would minister to each heart according to our need, as You alone know it. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

America’s Terrible Condition

I suspect that there isn’t anyone here who would disagree with the statement that America is in terrible shape this morning. Tomorrow is Memorial Day, the

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day on which we remember those who have given their lives for this nation in time of war. But we are remembering what they have done at a time when their legacy is being squandered. The principles, and the liberties, and the values that men have fought and died for are being devalued, discarded, and forgotten at a breathtaking pace. We’re living in a disturbing time, a tragic time. And part of the tragedy is that most people, and even many Christians, don’t understand why America is in this appalling condition.

But in such a time as this, we turn to the Word of God for the answers. Turn with me in your Bibles, please, to the book of Ephesians, chapter six, beginning at verse ten. I want to read just four verses out of this familiar passage this morning. Ephesians six, beginning at verse ten. I’m reading from the Old King James Bible, because there’s a particular emphasis in that translation that will be important to what I have to say this morning. The Apostle Paul says this:

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle, not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. (Ephesians 6:10-13)

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The Central Fact of America’s Condition

Christianity is an exclusive religion. It says that the Bible and the Bible alone is the truth of God. It is a book that tells the world how to be saved, and it tells the Christian how to live. And all of it is based on propositional truth. Here Paul tells us some vital facts. Because certain things are true, you need to put on the whole armor of God. You need all of it, and you need to know how to use it, because certain things are true.

The thing that is true that we need to understand this morning is that Satan is alive and active in this world, and that he and his forces are behind all of the evils that we see in America, and in the world at large.

Now there may be someone here this morning who is wondering about this. You may be saying to yourself, “With the situation in America as it is today, with the situation in the world as it is today, are you really going to spend your time this morning telling us what the Bible has to say about the Devil, and about these principalities and powers?”

If you have such a feeling, I could say many things to you this morning, but let me say just this one thing: If you are saying this because you think that you are a realist, and because you think what we are going to consider this morning is unrealistic, you are of all people the most un-realistic. You are, of all people, not facing the situation in America and in the world as it really is this morning. There

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is nothing more realistic, nothing more relevant, to the terrible situation that our nation finds itself in this morning, than the words we are about to consider.

More Relevant Than Talk Radio and Tea Parties

What we have read here in Ephesians this morning is more relevant to the condition of this nation and this world at this hour, than all of the talk of the politicians, and the statesmen, and the talk radio people, and the political movements.

Now I know that I’ve just made a very strong and sweeping statement. And the only way I can do that is because I can prove it from the Bible. I say it on Biblical authority. If you believe the Bible at all, you must believe that what we have just read tells us the ultimate cause of the world situation, and it is more urgently relevant than anything else I could say to you this morning.

All of the talk of the politicians and the pundits deals with symptoms. The moral problems of this nation are a symptom of something far deeper. The worldwide slaughter of the unborn is a symptom of a far greater life-and-death struggle. The problems of the global economy are a symptom of something far more serious. The wars that are being fought in various parts of the globe this morning are a symptom of a far more eternally significant warfare. The natural disasters and environmental catastrophes that the world is experiencing are symptoms of a far worse catastrophe that happened long, long ago, in a realm outside of this world.

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What I'm speaking of is the fall of the Devil – the fall of Satan into sin. And the fall of a significant portion of the angels of God, who joined Satan in his rebellion. These are the “principalities and powers” of which Paul speaks. Satan's personal activity brought sin into this world. The activity of Satan and his armies is behind all of the evil that we see in America and the world at this moment.

Why did Jesus Christ come into this world? First John chapter 3, verse 8 tells us: “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.”

Why did Jesus Christ go to the cross? He died to save sinners. But just what was involved in saving sinners? Colossians chapter two beginning at verse 13, tells us: “And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” And then notice this: “Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” – triumphing over them in the cross. The only cure for the evils that are perpetrated in this world by Satan and his hosts is the cross of Jesus Christ. That is the Gospel message.

Medicating Symptoms While Ignoring the Disease

Postmodern thinkers – not only in the secular realm, but also in the church – constantly fail to do something that is vitally important. They fail to differentiate

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between the symptoms of the deep, deep sickness into which this nation and this world have fallen, and the root cause of the disease. And all that the world can do, and all that the church, more and more frequently is doing, is to try and deal with symptoms.

Many Evangelicals today are caught up in trying to make this world a better place, to make this life a better life, rather than recognizing that this world is passing away, that it is doomed – and that Jesus Christ Himself has commanded us to focus our efforts on the things that matter for the life to come, and for the world to come – the salvation of lost sinners, and the nurturing of the saints.

If a doctor, were to spend all of his time only treating the symptoms of a patient who has a deadly disease, but he never tried to deal with the root cause, the disease itself – then the patient would die, and that doctor would be guilty of a criminal act of malpractice.

That is the problem of the world at this moment. That is why the politicians and the commentators are trying to deal with all of the world’s problems in the way that they do – they have never understood the cause. It is something that they cannot and do not face, because with few and precious exceptions, they do not have regenerated eyes to see what the real problem is.

And so they’re constantly meeting and arguing about what needs to be done, and sometimes coming to some agreement, but then the agreement falls apart, or the legislation or the plan of action that they put in place fails to accomplish its

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objective, and they are disappointed, the people are disappointed, and people have less and less hope that the problems can be solved.

But the real tragedy is that the Christian church, which has the message, which has the answer that can expose the cause and provide the cure – the tragedy is that the Christian church itself, is spending so much of its time doing and saying things that the unbelieving politicians can do and say. And the church is doing it because it wants to give people the impression that Christianity is relevant. And people only think that a thing is relevant if you talk in their terms – in other words, in terms of the symptoms.

That, dear friends, is pathetic. And beyond that, it is tragic. The church that does such things is guilty of criminal malpractice, medicating the symptoms rather than proclaiming God’s cure. Only the Christian church can proclaim the cure. Only the Christian church has the cure. The Christian – if you really believe what the Bible says here in Ephesians chapter six – the Christian has the only genuine explanation for the world situation as it is, and the only answer for it – Jesus Christ.

And you know, one of the things that bothers me the most is that most of the politicians and pundits who claim to be Evangelical Christians, think and talk and act as though Ephesians chapter six did not exist. They think and act and talk as though medicating the symptoms were enough, and that proclaiming the real cause

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of the world’s problems and proclaiming the one and only cure, was not even an option.

Of course, this is a message that is utterly ridiculed by the world. We can expect that. We should expect that. The world is spiritually blind. But when the *church* ridicules it, when *Christians* act as though this were not even in the Bible – that is a far more serious problem in the eyes of God. It is sin.

There is a Conflict

First of all, Paul in these verses directs our attention to the fact that there is a conflict. “We wrestle,” he says. Paul uses two different terms to describe the conflict that we are in. First he says, “We wrestle.” And then in verse 13 and following he speaks of armed warfare. Why does he do this? He does it because it shows that there are two aspects of the conflict. There is an individual aspect. We, as individual Christians, wrestle in this conflict. Paul is speaking here of the intimate nature of the conflict. It is true that Christians are engaged in this conflict as a massed army, as the church of Jesus Christ, as the army of the Lord.

It is true that there are two opposing armies arrayed against each other in this conflict. But at the same time, this conflict is an individual matter as well. There is wrestling. The picture is of two men grappling with each other, one trying to overpower the other. We not only have to watch as an army, we have to watch individually. We not only have to engage in the conflict as an army, we have to

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engage in it individually. We not only have to stand against the enemy as an army, we have to stand against the enemy individually.

And so Paul uses the terms of warfare: “Put on the whole armor of God,” verse 10, “that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” “Put on the whole armor of God,” verse 13, “that you may be able to stand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.” Paul uses these terms to show the serious and terrible and fierce nature of the conflict. You are in it. You can’t get away from it. You can either be in the conflict wearing the armor of God, being strong in the Lord and in the power of His might, or you can be in the conflict unarmed, unprepared, unprotected, and doomed to one spiritual defeat after another.

The nature of the conflict is that of standing against an enemy that’s attacking. That’s the first thing you have to do. You have to repulse the attack. And you have to keep on doing it because the enemy comes at you again, and again, and again. And even when you get a temporary victory, you can’t let down your guard. You can’t say, “It’s all over, I can go away on a spiritual vacation.” Absolutely not! The moment you do that, you are sure to be under attack. This is a relentless war. There is never any discharge from this army. This clearly needs to be emphasized. Why? Because so many Christians don’t realize this. So many Christians don’t recognize that this life, for the Christian, is a life of conflict until the end. And we will only be delivered out of the conflict by leaving this world and going into the presence of Christ.

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Not to realize this means that you are being subverted and defeated by the devil. And that is the problem of so much of the church today. Most of the Evangelical church today is the feel-good church. The last thing that it wants to hear is that there is a raging spiritual conflict, and that Christians inevitably are in that conflict, and that if you don’t realize that, it means you are defeated from the very outset.

No, the Apostle Paul says, “we wrestle.” You’re in this conflict. “Stand therefore.” And even when there’s victory in the conflict, make sure you’re still standing, because the enemy is going to come right back at you again, he’s going to try all sorts of different means and methods of attack to try to knock you off your feet and keep you on the ground, spiritually speaking. The great task of life, the great business of life for the Christian, is to keep standing.

The Conflict Is Not a Human One

Now what does Paul say about the nature of the conflict? Well, here he brings us to the very essence of the matter. He brings us to the most important thing that every Christian must recognize today. If you take nothing else away from this message this morning, take away this one thing. This is the fact – the vital fact – that every Christian needs to realize. This is the fact that is the key to the situation America is in today. This is the fact that is the key to the situation that the entire world is in today. This is the fact that is the key to the essential nature of the message of the Bible from beginning to end.

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You see, there is something unique about the Bible. It is the only book in the world that gives this teaching. It is the only book in the world that presents this fact. And that is because it is the only supernatural book, the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God. This isn’t man speaking. This is God speaking. This isn’t the world’s wisdom. This is God’s genuine wisdom. The world doesn’t have this. Only the Bible has it. Only the Christian has it. The whole point of view of the Word of God is different from anything else in this world.

And so, our perspective on what we see going on around us in this world needs to be different from anything that the world has to say about the nature of the situation, and how to deal with it. Nobody understands the world as it really is this morning, except the Christian – if in fact you accept this teaching, if you understand that it is true, and you think and act accordingly. I submit to you that our willingness to accept this teaching is a very thorough-going test of our acceptance of the Christian faith, because this teaching is essential to Christian the faith. It is essential to the Gospel. It is essential to the entire message of the Bible from beginning to end.

And so Paul by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit gives us this vital fact. The vital fact that every Christian must face. And he puts it to us both negatively and positively. He starts off with the negative. Why must I do all this? Why must I “be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might”? Why must I “put on the whole armor of God”? Why is it true to say that no other power, and no other armor, can enable me to stand? Paul gives the answer. He says, “We wrestle.”

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But how? “Not against flesh and blood.” Actually, in the Greek, Paul says, “we wrestle not against blood and flesh.” What’s his point? What he is saying is this: “We wrestle not against men.” We wrestle not against men. We are up against not men only, not human beings only. Our problem is not that of men, or of mankind. It’s something else.

This is a basic and fundamental proposition of the Bible. And here we see how very much the Biblical viewpoint differs from the worldly viewpoint. The first thing you’ve got to realize, Paul is saying, is that the problem that is confronting you as an individual, the problem that is confronting the nation, the problem that is confronting the world, is not merely a human problem. It is much higher than that. It is much deeper than that. It is much bigger than that. And therefore, it is much more difficult. And therefore, the solution is not a human solution.

The world, of course, does not believe this. And that is why the world is as it is. The world says that the cause of the trouble is economic, or it is political, or it is social, or it is moral. And if we can only deal with those things, things will change for the better and all will be well.

Today, some people say that *the* problem is that we have departed from our founding documents, our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution. That’s a great problem. But it’s not *the* problem.

The problem, others say, is the unbridled growth of government. No, that is not *the* problem.

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The problem is the lack of integrity in government. No, that is not *the* problem.

The problem is the threat of radical Islam. No it’s not.

The problem is deterioration of family values. No it’s not.

The problem is abortion. As horrible as that is, it is not *the* problem.

All of those things, and a thousand others we could name, are not *the* problem. They are *symptoms* of *the* problem.

“We wrestle not against flesh and blood.” Man isn’t the problem. What man is doing – or *not* doing – isn’t the problem. The problem is not merely on the human level. Yes, there are human problems. Terrible problems. Difficult problems. But those are the symptoms of the disease. They are not the disease itself. The real cause is further back. “Not against flesh and blood.”

The whole conduct of affairs in the world this morning, and even in much of the church, is the supposition that we are *only* wrestling against flesh and blood. That the problem is man. And that the problem can therefore be solved by human, earthly ways and means. The world, and much of the church, is focused on man. They never rise higher. They never grasp and understand that the real problem is a *spiritual* problem, not a problem of flesh and blood. “We wrestle not against flesh and blood.” This is absolutely basic.

So first Paul puts it negatively. But then he also puts it positively. “We wrestle not against flesh and blood.” Well, against what then? We wrestle against the

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Devil – “*against* principalities, *against* powers, *against* the rulers of the darkness of this age, *against* spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” *Against* – *against* – *against* – *against*! What is this?

Once again, let me say it: You are looking straight into the face of what is most essential in the Biblical record and in Christian teaching. What is the problem of America this morning? What is the problem of the world this morning? What is the ultimate cause? It is not man! It is the Devil and his unseen forces and powers. That is the Biblical proposition. That is what God’s Word says is the real truth of the matter.

A Truth That is Ridiculed

Now let’s face it. Here is something that is not only not believed today. It is rejected and ridiculed and scorned today. It is regarded as a joke.

“The Devil! Principalities and powers! Unseen spiritual forces! The world says that this is an insult to a man’s intelligence. There may be somebody thinking that, sitting here now. How can anyone in the 21st century believe *this*? With the world as it is, are you really proposing to preach about the Devil? Are you really proposing to preach about unseen spiritual forces?

“This is an insult to my intelligence! Why don’t you tell us something practical? Why don’t you tell us how to solve the political problems, or the economic problems, or the terrorism problem, or how to stop abortion? Why don’t you face the facts? Why don’t you face the stark realities of life in the 21st

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century, instead of talking about some unseen spiritual forces, instead of talking about the Devil? This is nonsense! This is impractical!”

That’s what’s being said, isn’t it? The Biblical viewpoint is being utterly and completely ridiculed.

But what troubles me much more is this: Not only is it being ridiculed by the world, it is being played down in the church, it is being ignored in the church, it is even being ridiculed in the church. The Evangelical church to such a great extent is preoccupied with the symptoms, and not dealing with the root problem.

Christian, What About Your Worldview?

Let me ask you a question this morning: Does this come into your essential thinking? “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers.” Is this always in your thinking? Is this the basis of your worldview? As you look at the world as it is today, do you look at Ephesians 6:10-13, and do you say immediately, “Here’s the explanation!”? Do you normally think like that, Christian people? All I can say is that if we don’t, we’ve got a very defective sort of Christianity.

This is an essential and vital part of the Christian faith and the Christian message. Paul says that you must think this way. You must never relax. You must never relent. And you must understand that this is the reason why it is the job of the church to do two things and two things only – to preach the Gospel to the world, and to nurture the saints in sound doctrine which produces right living.

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That is the only answer! The Gospel and the Gospel alone is the answer for this troubled and unhappy and chaotic world.

There is no telling what God will do if we His people repent of our un-Scriptural ways.

God’s Word Tossed Away

The hand of God’s righteous wrath is poised against this nation, and rightly so. This nation has fallen into great evil.

It is bad enough that God’s Word has been pushed aside in the public square. But in our time, the Word of God has been pushed aside within the Evangelical church. God’s people need to repent. Often we find in the pages of the Word of God and in the history of the world that God was merciful to a nation because of a faithful remnant. We should not think it is too late for God’s remnant to plead for His mercy. But we must be a faithful remnant.

Why is our nation in the shape it is in? The Bible has lost its influence. We read of a parallel situation in Nehemiah chapter 9. Here is the setting: A remnant of the children of Israel had returned to land from captivity in Babylon. We read in Nehemiah 9:1 that all the people assembled together “with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads...and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.” And what was the iniquity that they confessed? We find the heart of it in verse 26 – “Lord, we rebelled against You, and we cast Your law” – Your Word – “behind our backs.”

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Here is the picture: A man is walking along a road and he has the Word of God in his hands. And as he is walking along, he throws God’s Word over his shoulder and lets it fall to the ground behind him, and he just keeps on walking. Utterly forsakes God’s Word. Tosses it behind him. Rejects it. Treats it as useless. As a nation, that is exactly what we have done. This nation has been blessed above all nations in having God’s Word in our hands. But we have taken God’s Book, and we have tossed it over our collective shoulder, and we have just kept on going – farther and farther away from God’s Word. The influence of the Bible on this nation over the last fifty years – during my own lifetime – has gone down, down, down.

Why the Bible Lost Its Influence in the Nation – And How to Regain It

Why has this happened? The Bible lost its influence in the nation – listen to me – the Bible lost its influence in the nation, because the Bible lost its influence in the church. That is where the problem began. It began long before Madalyn Murray decided to go to court to get prayer and Bible reading thrown out of the schools. It began long before the Supreme Court ruled that killing her unborn child is a woman’s constitutional right. It began long before governments began passing laws that make Christian apologetics a hate crime.

The Bible subsequently lost its influence in the nation because the Bible first lost its influence in the church. The church has gone after all kinds of other things.

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In many ways, the church has tossed the Bible over its shoulder just as ancient Israel did. And that is where the problem must be solved – in the church.

But the answer to the political and economic and moral and social crises of our times is not for Evangelicals to organize more political pressure groups. The answer is not for Evangelicals to become involved in a wider range of so-called faith-based initiatives. The answer is not for Evangelicals to seek empty promises from political candidates. And the answer is not for the Evangelical church to reinvent itself to try to please the world.

The answer to the crisis of our times is submission to the Word of God. *We* need to repent. *We* need to go back. *We* need to go back and pick up God’s Word that we have in so many ways so lightly cast aside. And *we* need to get back into the Word in a new and thoroughly committed way. That is what ancient Israel did in the book of Nehemiah. We read in that same chapter, chapter nine, that during this time of repentance the entire remnant stood and heard the Word of God read and explained to them for a number of days for six hours a day, and they spent another six hours confessing their sins and worshipping the Lord their God in the proper way. True repentance. True worship. True turning to the Word of God.

That genuine turning to the Word of God meant that the Israelites saw that they needed to make some hard decisions. They had to give up practices, and associations, and relationships that were contrary to God’s Word. It wasn’t easy.

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Many tears were shed. But they did it. And God blessed them for it, and God re-established the nation, because the remnant repented.

God’s warning to the nation of Israel in Second Chronicles chapter 7 and verse 14 is also God’s warning to His church today: “If My people who are called by My name” – He is speaking not to the nation as a whole, but to the people of God, God’s remnant within the nation. “If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from *their* wicked ways” – not the wicked ways of the nation, but the wicked ways of the people of God – “then I will hear from Heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”

Dear friends, I guess you might have noticed that I am passionate about this message. I believe that this is an undeniable truth that we need to face: As the church goes, so goes the nation. The healing of the nation will begin with the repentance of the church. The repentance of the church will come through faithful, prophetic, expository preaching of the Word by faithful men. And I thank God that that is what you have here in this church.

Never forget that you have the answer! Never get side-tracked into doing other things! That’s what the devil wants you to do. Don’t do it! Remember, you wrestle, not against flesh and blood. “Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.”

Let’s pray.

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Father, we need an adjustment in our worldview. Perhaps some of us, Father, need a *radical* adjustment in our worldview this morning. I pray, Father, that You would speak to us through Your Word. Work in our hearts and in our minds that we might think Your thoughts after You, and that we might recognize those things that are of *eternal* importance, and we that might recognize those things that will *really* make a difference in this world, and focus our attention and our thoughts and our efforts in our homes, in our church, in the workplace, in the political realm – *everywhere*, Father, in every area of life and ministry – on those things that really matter. We pray in Christ’s name, Amen.

About the Broadcast

The Scripture-Driven Church airs each week across the United States and around the world. Our goal is to preach the Gospel to the lost, and to equip believers to stand upon and live by the sole authority of God’s Word, to the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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