

Sanctification
Stand Strong for Holiness
Preparation – Part 3

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Introduction

Every Christian is called to walk in newness of life. We are saved from the penalty of sin and the corruption of sin and we are called to be holy in all our conduct. One of our great enemies in this pursuit is a nasty “little” thing called temptation. In our study of sanctification, we are currently zeroing in on the matter of withstanding this enemy. There are three phases in the battle—preparation, execution, and response—preparation for battle, execution of battle, and responding to the outcome of battle. Tonight’s session is the third of three sessions which deal with phase 1, preparation. The way you prepare for the assault of temptation starts with putting on the right equipment. In Ephesians 6:13-17, Paul calls this equipment “the armor of God.” By way of review, the previous two sessions examined the articles of this armor. Having the right equipment in place is key, but so is exercise.

Soldiers prepare for the possibility of battle through exercise. They exercise their bodies to be in tip-top shape. They exercise their minds by studying battle strategies and learning how to use their equipment to its highest level of efficiency. Christian soldiers also exercise. There is an activity in which they must involve themselves in order to be ready for the evil day. That activity is PRAYER.

Jesus said so in Matthew 26:41. “Watch and pray that you may not fall into temptation.” Also when outlining the Christian’s pattern of prayer, Jesus taught us to pray, “lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:13). In addition, Paul concludes his exhortation to put on the whole armor with an exhortation to pray.

Ephesians 6:10-20 – Read

1. The Exhortation to Pray.

Prayer is conversing with God. Jesus taught his disciples by often slipping away to be by himself to talk with his father. He taught his disciples to pray. It all starts with address, “our Father.” This is the crux of the matter. What a privilege. We must never overlook the wonder it is that God has time for us and is interested in us and wants us to talk with him. Have you ever been in a group and it seems everyone is more interested in what they have to say than anybody else? You start to talk and no more attention is paid to you than if you were silent. It is as if you really aren’t there or don’t have anything worth

listening to. I can assure you of this. When you open your heart to God, he listens! He hears. He knows every word, and he cares. Pray. Talk to God. He listens. No word that you speak will ever go unheard. But this is what prayer is. It is conversing with the Lord. It is sharing in fellowship with him.

Praying is an action word. It is not passive. Paul refers to prayer as labor when he tells the Colossians that one of their own, Epaphras, always toils or struggles on their behalf in his prayers. Prayer requires an outpouring of attention and energy. It is not mindless meditation. It is an active involvement in the heart and according to the mind of God. Picture Jesus in Gethsemane, preparing for his hour of great temptation. The cross awaits him and he is laboring with the Father, so earnest, so involved that his sweat becomes blood. When you struggle to pray, do not be surprised at the effort required to stay on task, to stay in the zone. Neither the flesh nor Satan wants us to pray because prayer is this important to defeating the enemy of temptation. So exercise! Call out to God. Let him hear your heart.

2. When to Pray.

At all times. There is never a good time not to pray. We should pray at all times. Why does Paul say this? I think for much of us we wait to pray until we are deep in trouble. That is certainly a crucial time to pray. But we should also pray when the sailing seems smooth. We should not wait until we are desperate. We need to pray ahead of temptation, in advance of the test. In Luke 21, Jesus gave solemn warning about his future return. He said, "watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with . . . cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. . . . but stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape . . ."

Pray every day. Pray in the morning. Pray in the evening. Pray at noon. Pray without ceasing. Pray at all times. When things seem calmest, pray the hardest. Pray before trouble comes, knowing that sooner or later it will. And to be ready to stand in the evil day, you must pray. I think of Jesus' words to Peter, "Satan demanded to have you to sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:31-32). Jesus had already prayed for him before he gave the warning. He prayed at all times and so should we.

3. How to Pray. Paul specifies 4 characteristics with which we must pray.

First, in the Spirit. What is this? Is it some hyperventilation? Some prayer with a unfamiliar language? I do not think so. Romans 8 helps us out.

V. 5 for those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you." (5-12)

Prayer in the Spirit is prayer that has the mind set upon the Spirit not the flesh. It looks at prayer and the priorities in prayer not from the standpoint of the flesh and satisfying the flesh. Rather it looks at prayer from the heart of the Spirit who longs to please and honor God. So much of the prayers of people are for what they want. Prayer that is in the Spirit prays for what God wants. Even the way the Spirit himself prays. Romans 8:26 and 27 tell us that the Spirit intercedes for us with groaning too deep for words, and he prays according to the will of God. That's the way Paul is telling us to pray at all times. We pray for holiness more than health. We pray more for obedience than comfort. We pray for strength more than we pray for an easy time. We pray for purity rather than fleshly satisfaction. That is prayer in the Spirit.

Second, we are to pray with all prayer and supplication. There are varieties or kinds of prayer and we should pray with all of them. Prayer includes worship. It includes confession of sin and appeal for forgiveness. It includes thanksgiving, and it includes petitions. Prayer includes general sorts of prayer and pointedly specific pleas for God to work. We should pray publicly and privately; as well as here and there and everywhere.

Third, we are to pray with alertness. That this feature is important is underscored well by the whole of Scripture. Watch and pray that you may not fall into temptation. Being alert means being on the lookout. You know what to look out for. You are anticipating the assault. You see signs of it and pray accordingly. It is like good driving. A good driver is on the lookout for what other drivers are going to do. They anticipate the possibility or likelihood that others are going to behave in a way that may result in danger, and they prepare in advance. They see danger coming and take measures for protection. Proverbs 22:3 says, "The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it." Prayer with alertness is on the lookout. What kind of threats are on the horizon? What are the likely assaults I am going to receive from the flesh? Let me pray in anticipation.

Fourth, let us pray with perseverance. Perseverance is what keeps on going when the going gets tough. It keeps on going when fatigue sets in. Let there be no let up. Temptation may look dead, and it may be mostly dead, but as long as you are alive, don't stop praying for God to deliver you from evil.

4. For Whom to Pray.

All the saints. Prayer should be concerned with others not just ourselves. When other believers are strong against the temptation to sin, their strength will also encourage us.

And our care and concern should be for the spiritual well-being of others as well as ourselves. And we should especially be concerned for the strength and victory of brothers and sisters in Christ. You know, I greatly appreciate the fact that Randy Slak regularly reminds the church body to pray for its pastors. You should. And believe me I need it. But each of us needs such prayers. One of the reasons we should be accountable to one another in reference to areas of struggle is not just to keep one another in check, but also to keep one another in prayer. Pray for all the saints.

Paul the Apostle did not merely tell others to pray this way, he did it constantly. Every letter he writes, he talks about how he prays for the saints. He is convinced their holiness depends in part on his prayers for them so he prayed constantly and fervently and pointedly for the saints. Even pray for saints you think are strong. Paul asked for prayer for himself. It seems almost amazing that we would imagine needing to pray for the Apostle Paul. But no, even he needed prayer.

5. For What to Pray.

To do what we ought to do. Paul specifically asked that the Ephesian believers pray for his words and for his boldness. This is praying in the Spirit. It is the kind of thing the Spirit would want. But I also note what he says at the end, "that I may declare [the gospel] boldly, as I ought to speak. What we should pray for is that we would do what we ought to do. That sounds pretty simple, but this kind of praying is on the top of Paul's priority list of requests for himself. Pray for me that I would do what I ought to do.

We pray this way for others when we pray for the fruit of the Spirit, when we pray for godliness, for obedience, for strength. Colossians 1:9-11 is one of my favorite prayers of Paul. He prayed that the saints would do what they ought to do. (Read)

Conclusion

So there we have the exercise of Christians that is designed to compliment the armor we put on. We are to pray all the time in the Spirit for all the Saints according to the will of God for his glory.