

Today is the last of our sermons on the Book of Ephesians. You may remember that the last six or seven weeks we've been looking at Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, and we've come to the final chapter today and one word stands out. It's the word "stand". Three times, Paul encourages his readers to stand. He says, "We are to stand against the wiles of the devil." And then a few verses later, he goes on to say, "After you've put on the armor of God, stand firm. Stand, therefore."

It's been pointed out that the whole book of Ephesians can be summed up in just three words, and one of those words is stand. To get a full understanding of that, let me tell you what the other two words are. The first of them is "sit". In chapter two, Paul says this. "God who is rich in mercy, out of his great love for us, saved us by grace and seated us with Christ, Jesus."

In the early chapters of the letter, Paul is very much more abstract and theological than in the second part of the letter. He's concerned in the early chapters by the question of how we're put right with God. And the word that comes out there to sum up all of his thinking, is grace. He says, "For by grace, you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not the result of your own works."

In other words, we don't earn God's favor. God's mercy to us does not come as a reward. It comes rather, by grace, as a gift. Which is why the Christian life begins not with striving, but with rest, as we receive God's grace. Sitting is a position of rest. We enjoy fellowship with God. We're put into right relationship with Him, not because of the good works that we have done, but rather by resting and being open to receive the wonderful gift of his grace.

The call on us isn't to strive to know God, to rush around trying to do good things to make peace with Him. Rather, the call on us is to sit in his presence, to enjoy right relationship with Him, to receive the gift of grace. God in Christ has already done everything that is necessary for our salvation.

In Him, our strivings cease. We're called to sit, not strive.

So if the first word is sit, the second word is walk. Ephesians begins with St. Paul setting out his theology, but in chapter four, he takes a more practical tone and he starts to tell his readers how they should live in the light of the gospel that he's been explaining to them. So chapter four begins. "I beseech you walk worthy of your vocation."

The key thing to notice here is that Paul encourages his readers to walk a certain way after he's encouraged them to sit and enjoy God's favor. It's important that it's that way round, not the other way round. We don't live a godly, or work or try to live a godly life, to earn God's favor. Rather, we walk in God's ways in response to the mercy that he has shown us. Not to earn it, but in response to it.

So we sit, we walk, and finally, we come to chapter six, where Paul encourages us to stand. We're called to stand against the wiles of the devil, "For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood," he says, "But against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places," which seems to me like a pretty comprehensive list of our enemies.

St. Paul is clear that there are spiritual forces of evil in the world, which might be manifest in various ways. His list makes clear that evil can take many forms. And after the week we've had, and all the news we've heard, how could any of us dispute that that is the case? The church, over the years, has tried or flitted between two extremes of either becoming obsessed with the notion of evil in an unhealthy way, or the other extreme is just to ignore it. Pretend it's not there, it's not a serious issue.

Personally, I think there must be a sensible middle way. I have no problem, just as I believe that there's a spiritual force for good in the world, to

think that there must also be a malevolent spiritual force, which isn't for good.

The town in Dunblane in Scotland is famous in the UK because sadly there was a very tragic mass shooting. We don't have too many of them, but in 1996, a man called Thomas Hamilton went into a primary school and killed 16 children. And it's stayed alive in our consciousness because Andy Murray, the tennis player was in the school, was one of the children. And there's a very telling interview the day after the attack, where the headmaster, Ron Taylor, summarized the tragedy in these words. He said, "Evil visited us yesterday, and we don't know why."

And I think actually that Mr. Taylor was right to label what happened as being visited by evil. He didn't say Thomas Hamilton came and wrought havoc. He recognized and named evil as having visited that school.

Before I say more, I need to point out that evil will never win. Evil will never have the last word. The Bible is clear that Jesus has already won the decisive victory over the powers of evil darkness and sin on the cross. St. Paul says in Colossians he triumphed over the forces of evil on the cross. "By rising to new life and overcoming death through his resurrection, evil's strongest weapon, the power of death, has been defeated. Jesus has won a great and triumphant victory."

And we as Christians share in that victory, we don't need to fight to obtain it. We simply need to hold against our challenges. Our task is one of holding, not of attacking. Paul says that in Christ, we are already more than conquerors. We are on the victory side. In Him, we stand. We don't fight for victory. We fight from victory, Christ's victory.

And this is a very important point. Those of us who have sat with Christ and know his presence and walked his way can stand against the evil one. Evil has no hold over us. In Christ, we are more than conquerors. His power that he shares with us is stronger than any other power. Because Jesus has

won the victory, St. Paul's says we're called to stand against the enemy. Not fight it, stand. We're to adopt a defensive position because our enemy is already defeated. It's the standing we might encourage our children to do when we say we'll stand up to the bullies. Don't go looking for a fight with them, don't intimidate them or engage with them. Just stand up to them. Don't go looking for trouble, be prepared to stand.

And this is Paul saying how we should handle the evil one. We're called to hold our ground. There's a difference between the warfare waged by Jesus, which ended in Him winning a decisive battle. And us, our battle is essentially defensive because the outcome is already decided. That's why the armor that Paul describes in this passage is largely defensive. He's not describing weaponry, but armor. And I won't go into any detail about this armor, but I do want to point out the first thing he refers to is the belt of truth.

The old versions of the Bible talk of girding your loins with the truth. It's a girdle that the Roman soldier, who Paul would have been so familiar with, they put on first. It holds everything else in place. The rest of the armor hangs off it. And it's a girdle of truth. It reminds us that the Christian message is true. And goodness knows, in our day, when truth seems to be such an embattled topic, we hold on to the truth of the gospel. That is our one and only foundation, our starting point for interpreting our life and the world. It's the gospel made known in Jesus Christ, the gospel of truth. We're to hold on to the sheer truth of the gospel. It's like a belt which holds everything else together. It's the fixed point, which allows us to make sense of our crazy world.

So three words, three words to sum up the whole of this book of Ephesians that we've been considering. Sit, walk, stand. Together, they sum up so much of Paul's teaching. And together, I think, they sum up what is most important in life.

Amen.