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Title: If You Are a Christian then the Struggle is Real

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### Eph 6:10–12 ESV

**10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.**

Intro: Last week I share my kids' amazement about the racism of my growing up experience. This reminds me of my amazement when my wife's work colleague described his experience of driving while black. I couldn't believe such things still happened, especially in a place as racially diverse and politically progressive as the Bay Area. I wasn't alone. All the white people at the gathering found it hard to believe, and the fact that he laughed and was clearly taking it in stride as a very normal part of life was very disorienting to the group.

In the last few weeks I think most of us have felt disoriented, discouraged, and disheartened by what we've seen in the news. Perhaps what has been most disorienting is the way George Floyd's death moved so quickly from a debate about what good policing looks like to questions like,

- What does a true and accurate history of the United States look like, who gets to decide?
- Is there really such a thing as systemic racism?
- What do we really mean when we say 'defund the police,' 'Black lives matter,' or 'All lives matter'?
- What are the real threats to the future of our nation and form of government?

With each of these questions there is an implied "Us" and an implied "Them." We are now regularly being encouraged to see other Americans as "the problem" or, worse yet, "the enemy." When this happens, the Devil giggles. And the Devil is especially gratified when Christians treat each other this way.

We remember that Paul's Big Idea in his letter to the Ephesians is that there is that Jesus followers are a single, organic whole called the church or the Body of Christ. Jesus Christ is the

head of church and the church in turn is to be “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” (Eph 1:23). Every scheme of the devil, therefore, must surely have the goal of dividing God from people and people from each other. The whole armor of God is given to us precisely so that we can stand, united in power and love, against such schemes.

So in an effort to name and to stand against the devil’s schemes, I want to make two provocative statements about what is happening in the United States, based on our text:

**Systemic racism is real.**

**“They” are our neighbors, not our enemies.**

Let me expound on these.

### Systemic Racism is Real

If we take what the Apostle Paul says to heart, then we must accept that evil’s most dangerous and pervasive form is not personal, but systemic. Such evil, including the evil of racism, is larger than the actions of one group, one political party, one nation, or even one generation. Last week I suggested that racism is a disease that has been passed down from generation to generation. Like alcoholism, it is a disease of addiction that doesn’t just affect the individual, but everyone around them. I also asked you to watch the Phil Vischer video because Vischer provides a very clear explanation of how laws and economic policies have been used to place blacks at an economic disadvantage and keep them there. Racism in America is systemic because it is built into the structure of our society and because it affects both the society as a whole and every single person in it.

Taking our cues from Paul, we know how to understand systemic racism and see it for what it is. We acknowledge that it is larger than we can fully see, grasp or comprehend. While individuals participate in it and perpetuate it, systemic evil is always larger and more pernicious than we can see from our limited perspective. Systemic evil always feels nebulous and mysterious to us. We may even be tempted to believe that it doesn’t really exist. To help us, Paul uses several different terms that, together, make up the origin of systemic evil. He tells us that we are wrestling with “the rulers... the authorities... the cosmic powers over this present darkness... the spiritual forces in the heavenly places.” In other words, Paul confirms that not only is systemic evil *real* – but that **systemic evil – and specifically systemic racism - is a God-sized problem.**

This might be the moment in which we throw up our hands, give up, and become fatalistic – or worse, cynical – about it. But Paul is not fatalistic or cynical. Quite the contrary, Paul is celebrating the fact that **God has provided a God-sized solution:** With the full authority of the Father, Jesus Christ the Son enters the world and lays claim to every structure, every society, every system. In turn, the Father and the Son sends the Spirit-filled, gospel-motivated Church into the world to proclaim and model and demonstrate and demand that Christ’s Lordship is in full effect now, and will have the last say in the fullness of time.

**“They” are our neighbors, not our enemies.**

Before Paul attempts to name who the powers associated with “this present darkness” are, he makes a point of telling us who they are not. “For we do not wrestle with flesh and blood...” In Paul’s mind, it is critically important that we never confuse evil with the evil doers. Evil is a God-sized problem and we must trust God to solve it. Evil doers are human beings, made in the image of God, for whom Christ died on the cross. Paul knows that we are not only tempted to believe that systemic evil doesn’t exist, but also to believe that people are evil. **No one is evil, Paul says, but everyone is susceptible to doing evil.** (Romans 3:10-12, quoting Psalm 14 and Psalm 53 which are nearly identical).

This is a critical distinction to make. If we remember that we battle not against flesh and blood, then when it comes to systemic racism:

1. **Healing for Blindness.** We will see that every person is susceptible to blindness, needing God’s healing for eyes to be made healthy so bodies can be filled with light (Matt 6 from last week);
2. **Need for Humility.** We will act of humility, attending to the logs in our own eyes before removing someone else’s speck;
3. **Love Your Brother/Sister.** We can say, as John Wimber said of those who criticized him and his work in founding the Vineyard movement, “Your brother isn’t your enemy. He may act like it, but he’s not.”
4. **Respond with Compassion.** We can respond to those who hold racist views and act out of racist convictions compassionately as Jesus does, praying, “Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing!” If only I could pray this prayer for myself! Father forgive me for I don’t even realize the hurt I’m causing!
5. **Stop Scapegoating.** Most importantly, we stop scapegoating. We would stop making somebody else the problem, and stop believing the oldest lie in the book, namely that if we just get rid of “them” then everything will be as it should be.

#### **The call:**

If systemic racism is real, and flesh-and-blood people are not The Enemy, then what shall our response be?

**The response is always—and in every way—to stand in unified and unifying love.**

**Remembering Prop 8:** My coach: “Remember that you stand with everyone in your church, *even if you don’t stand for what they stand for.*”

**We are given God’s armor for one purpose: To stand.** We stand up FOR justice and righteousness. We stand WITH the poor and the exploited. We stand APART FROM any agenda or rhetoric that blames a person or a group for all our problems, and we go stand BESIDE that person or group instead – even if we don’t stand for everything they stand for!

**But perhaps most importantly, we stand in unity with our Christian brothers and sisters.**

When our black sisters and brothers tell us about how systemic racism affects their lives, we believe them. When we learn how systemic racism shows up in the church, we stand against it as a scheme of the devil.

**Church: We are called to stand up our Nation and its need to Recover from Racism. This is more important than our privilege, preferences, and our political parties. All those need to be laid down at the cross, and the armor taken up. We do not struggle against other Christians, or other Americans. But the struggle is real.**

Amen.