

# BELPRES CHURCH

## **Sermon Title: Just Neighbors**

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### **Scripture:**

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#### **Ephesians 6:10-18**

<sup>10</sup> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>11</sup> Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. <sup>12</sup> For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. <sup>13</sup> Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. <sup>14</sup> Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, <sup>15</sup> and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup> In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup> Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

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**Transcript:**

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Well, hello. Thank you for being here. Great to have you. Those of you who are in the room as well as those of you who are joining us online, just thank you for making us part of your Sunday worship. The first time I visited Jerusalem, I'd go every morning at sunrise to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is on the spot where tradition says that Jesus was crucified and buried. Christians had been praying on that spot for 2,000 years. But the first morning I was there, I didn't have a map, and the streets in Jerusalem are very windy and confusing, and I got completely lost. Couldn't figure out where I was.

But then I turned a corner and suddenly I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit and I knew I was close. And sure enough, I turned one more corner and there was the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. I felt my way there. Because when people have prayed at a place for 2,000 years, it leaves a spiritual presence that I could sense that guided me to that church. We are surrounded every day by spiritual forces, both good and evil. The evil ones stir up conflict and racism and discouragement and violence, but we also have the Holy Spirit that brings His healing into our relationships and gives us hope and courage and joy.

And that's what the Apostle Paul is getting at in the text that Jake just read a few minutes ago, the Apostle Paul says, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Now, by that Paul doesn't mean that there aren't natural causes for all that's wrong in the world, political causes, economic causes, all that psychological. Sociological. He's not saying that there aren't natural causes for evil in the world. What he's saying is that we don't only wrestle with natural causes, there are spiritual forces at work as well.

Now, that's a little hard for us Westerners to get our minds around, but man, our African and Asian and Latino brothers and sisters in Christ, they understand this way better than we do. Natural causes cannot explain all evil. So for instance, the Nazis were the most educated people on the planet, so their evil cannot be explained by a lack of education. Karl Marx said that, "Capitalism is the source of evil, and Communism is the answer." But the oppressions of the Soviet Union and Mao's China are sufficient to show it's not about economic systems, there's also evil in the world. There's just evil. And that's our biggest problem.

I've told you before about a student I had when I was a college pastor. She was severely depressed, suicidal, she had a therapist. She was on medications. Nothing helped until we put a prayer team around her. And then suddenly she began making breakthroughs in her therapy. The medications began to function properly. It took all three psychological, medical, spiritual solutions.

The same Bible that asserts there's a God, which most of us believe, also says, "There is a spiritual force of evil called Satan and his demons." And unless we go after those spiritual forces, we will not be able to defeat the brokenness in our own hearts, in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our world.

Thus, endeth the bad news portion of this sermon. You have eaten your broccoli. The rest is dessert. So, yay. The good news is this, on our own, we are incompetent to fight spiritual force of evil, but Jesus has the power to drive those demons out of our families, homes, neighborhoods. On our own, we can't, but Jesus can.

My daughter has a phrase that she's using a lot lately that I kind of like weaponized incompetence, weaponized... I think it has something to do with some of the men she's dated, but I'm not sure. On our own, we are incompetent to stand against the spiritual forces of evil, but Jesus gives us the power, the weapons that make us more than conquerors. The text we read today says, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power, not ours, His power put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. So when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground. And after you've done everything to stand, stand firm... Is there a word that's being repeated there? Stand four times in just a few verses to make the point, we can stand firm against the devil through two things.

First, what this passage calls the armor of God. Paul says things like, "Stand firm with the belt of truth buckled around your waist." When the devil assaults us with his lies, God's truth is what kind of helps us stand up against him. With your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. And in the Bible that word peace never just means peace and quiet. It comes from the Hebrew word shalom, and it means all things restored to the way God intended them to be. It means crime and violence and loneliness and poverty gone, and instead, reconciliation and community and people connected to Jesus. And I've preached on this passage and these spiritual weapons a bunch. So I'm not going to go into these today as much, because I've done it before, but we do have spiritual weapons to fight our spiritual battles.

The second thing we have, and I'm going to focus on for today, the second thing we have is prayer. The text says, pray in the Spirit on all occasions. Not sometimes, always, and pray in the Spirit, don't just toss your words up to God, but pray with and through the Holy Spirit. Because this is a spiritual battle, we need spiritual power that comes from the Holy Spirit. Jesus talks about this, in a part in the Bible where His disciples try to heal a demon possessed man, but they can't heal him. But then Jesus comes along and heals him, and His

disciples say, "Why couldn't we heal him Jesus?" And Jesus says, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

Which sort of implies that the disciples didn't even pray, right? They just tried to fix him on their own cleverness. Do you ever do that? Do you ever just try to... I do all the time, right? We can do it. God can help. That's our motto, right? And yes, we have skills that are helpful, but unless we pray, we are fighting a losing spiritual battle. Satan's goal is to discourage, disable, dismay, disqualify, disrespect, and discombobulate us. But we have spiritual power to dismiss, dislodge, disappoint, and disarm him through the power of Jesus. We are more than conquerors in Him.

And these spiritual forces are at work on people, but these spiritual forces are also at work in places. Just like I could kind of feel the Holy Spirit guide me to that church in Jerusalem because people had been praying there for 2000 years, evil forces also attached to place. That's why, for instance in the Bible, after they built the temple, they prayed over it for God's spirit to inhabit it. Not once, they prayed over it multiple times. And frequently in Israel's history, a king would come along that set up a false idol to a false God in the temple, until a reforming king came along to purify the temple by praying for it.

Pray out the evil spirits, pray in the Holy Spirit. That's why every building, every room in this church has been prayed over multiple times, because evil spirits can adhere to place and they can only be driven out by the power of Jesus. I know a church in Honolulu that was located in a neighborhood with a lot of crime. And so the senior pastor decided that every Sunday his ushers would go out into that neighborhood and pray with the business owners before they opened their business. Every Sunday his ushers would do this. The pastor said his head usher hated this idea, just hated it. Pastor said, "He was this kind of stoic, non-emotional, non-spiritual guy. You know, Stanford grad." I have no idea what he meant by that.

But this pastor told the usher, "Too bad, you're doing it." They're Pentecostal. That's how they roll. You can do that in a Pentecostal church. Our version would be me saying, "Let's form a committee to study it." So the usher started doing prayer walks every Sunday, praying for the businesses in that neighborhood. And after they'd done this for a while, the crime rate plummeted to almost zero. It made such a difference in the neighborhood that all the bars on that street, all the bar owners took up a collection to give to the church. So this usher hands this pile of money to the pastor and said, "This money comes from all the bars on our street. I don't even know if this is biblical. Can we take this?" And the pastor said, "Is it counterfeit?" And he said, "No." And the pastor said, "Heck, yeah, we're going to take it." Government can't transform a neighborhood like that. Politics can't transform a

neighborhood like that. Only Jesus does that, because some demons only come out by prayer. Jesus defeats the spiritual forces of evil that work on people and that are at work in places.

All of which brings me to the sermon series we're going to be doing for the next couple of weeks called Just Neighbors, about how to bring Jesus' healing, justice, and hope where we live. Because whether you live in an apartment or in a house, all around us there is pain, addictions, depression, divided families, financial problems, injustices of various kinds. And Jesus' command to us is to love your neighbor as yourself.

Very familiar, but do you ever think how challenging that command is? That one is really challenging. It means I want my neighbor to thrive as much as I do. I want other people's kids to thrive as much as my own kids thriving. I want other people's kids' school to be as good as my kids' school. I want other people's kids to have as bright a future as my kids. That is very, very challenging. And I want to water this commandment down to something that I can handle, because this is a little too much for me. So I try to water it down.

This will connect, I promise. I found out a while back that there was an alcoholic drink called a Presbyterian. Did you know this? There's an alcoholic drink called a Presbyterian. When I Googled it, the first article that came up was How to Make the Perfect Presbyterian. And I thought, "well, I need to read this because this is my job, right?" Here's what it is. It's whiskey and ginger ale with a lot, a lot, a lot of added soda water. Why would they call that a Presbyterian? The only thing I could think of is I guess they think we water everything down or something.

This Presbyterian wants to water this command down to something more tame. Like love your neighbor about as much as you love yourself, approximately as much. But here's the thing, if Jesus is blessing my neighbor, it means he's in the neighborhood. And I'm going to get some of that blessing as well.

Amen.

Thank you for the amen.

Sure.

I thought it was good too. Thank you. And if our neighborhoods are places of hope and joy and prosperity, I'm going to get that too. And there's lots of ways we can do that: make friends, visit that elderly person that shut in and no one ever talks to them, create community to fight the epidemic of loneliness that's in our country right now. And our leadership has prayed about how collectively we can make a difference in this. And one of the things they've landed on is one way we can collectively make a difference is to allow the Holy Spirit to help us reverse the long-term effects of redlining and racial covenants.

Now, before I go any further, let me just pause there, because I know when we talk about racial justice, it's a little controversial. And I just want to be clear what I'm saying and not saying, because I think from feedback I've gotten that maybe in the past when I've talked about this, it's made some of you feel like I'm saying, "We know that you don't care about racial justice and you're not doing anything about it," maybe even implying that you harbor negative feelings about people of color. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. That's not what I mean at all. It's actually, we talk about it actually more the opposite, because we know that you are a church that cares about justice, and we've got a long history of that. And we know many of you are already doing lots of things to heal injustice.

This is not about shame and blame. This is about how we can further heal injustice, as many of you have been doing, how we can keep doing that, how we can press further into that. And I also want to say just parenthetically, I know it sounds political, but I just, it is not. At this moment, I would love to use some of the Eastern Washington farm language I grew up with to make this point as clearly as I possibly can. I put no faith, no faith in either political party to fix this. No faith at all. And sometimes I think most both sides are making it worse, not better. This is a spiritual battle. This demon can only come out by prayer. And I am zealous for the name of Jesus, and I want Jesus and only Jesus to get the credit for healing this deepest, longest wound in our nation's history.

So if anything I say about this bothers you, please, please talk to me. Talk to the people in the lobby with the lanyards. Please talk to us, not about us, so we can journey together through this. And this is about being a disciple. At BelPres, we are laser focused on discipleship, and a disciple is someone who is becoming like Jesus. And all this year we've focused on these six characteristics of a disciple. We had a baptism Sunday, because one of the ways disciples tell the story of Jesus is to get baptized. And then we focused on evangelism, because disciples share the good news of Jesus. And we challenge us collectively to have 1200 gospel conversations about Jesus with people who don't know Him. And then we talked about how disciples live connected to a multicultural, multi-generational community, and all those differences create disagreements. So we just finished a sermon series on how Christians disagree biblically.

And another characteristic of a disciple is healers of injustice. There are hundreds of verses in the Bible, literally, hundreds of verses where God commands his people to heal injustice. And this slide, right there, that's just a few of them, that is just a partial list. It's sort of non-negotiable for a disciple. It's part of being a disciple.

So we're going to spend a couple of weeks talking about how we can continue to heal injustice in our neighborhoods by reversing the effects of racial covenants and redlining. As

you know, decades ago there were racial covenants in neighborhoods, some just around here. This property wasn't one of them, but some really near here covenants that didn't allow Black, Asian, Latino or Jewish people to live in those neighborhoods. The covenants said terrible things like, "Only those of the Aryan race may live here." That's a direct quote. There was also redlining, where some neighborhoods were coded red, because they were considered bad investments, not for economic reasons, based solely on race. It could have been a middle class neighborhood. It would've been coded red if Black people lived there. Also, banks wouldn't lend to Black people or anyone else who wasn't white. All of that deprived hundreds of thousands of Black, Asian, Latino people from homeownership. Now, obviously that was sin, and we all agree that that was sin. And it's been illegal since the '60s, but there are still long-term effects of that injustice that are with us today. Homeownership traditionally has been one of the best ways to build wealth. But African Americans and other minorities were excluded, which meant many haven't been able to accumulate that kind of wealth because of this historic wealth gap. And they also couldn't get loans to start small businesses and things like that.

In Washington, only 34% of African Americans own homes compared to 68% of white people, because of that historic wealth gap. On top of that, neighborhoods that were redlined face economic challenges still, because there hasn't been as much investment in those neighborhoods. And because a lot of school funding is tied to property tax, those neighborhoods, also, their schools aren't funded as well as other neighborhoods, which contributes to the educational and the opportunity gap.

The practice was eliminated, but the consequences are with us still. But it doesn't have to be that way. We can heal some of this. And BelPres, we are a church that wants to heal injustice. And there are a couple of ways to do that practically, which we'll talk about next week. But for this week, just two things. First, learn more. You can do that on our website or by talking to the people in the lobby with the lanyards. We can, for instance, help you find out if you live in an area that had a racial covenant. If you do, you probably wouldn't know that. Some of them are even still in the books. We can help you find that out.

Second, pray. This is a spiritual battle. Someone way back when invited demons of racism and exclusion into our neighborhoods, into our cities, and unless those demons are disinvited and kicked out, they will pop up in other weird ways. I've shared with you many times before about when I was in California, I lived near a suburb called Atherton. Wealthy Suburb, crime in that suburb was absolutely nonexistent. But my students would read the police reports because they were so bizarre. Like one woman called the police because the

dog food dish on her patio was moved, got moved, and she was freaked out. "Who moved the dog..." Probably, the dog, I'm guessing, right?

They would call the cops in that neighborhood, I'm serious, they would call the police for a parked car. That was one of the most frequent reasons the police were called a parked car. They were just captivated by fear. So my students made a t-shirt that said, "Free Atherton," because they were in bondage. That fear, that desire to exclude that is that same spirit. It's that spirit of exclusion that is still hanging around in a different form. So we got to pray that stuff out of our neighborhoods.

And even if you don't live in a neighborhood where there was a racial covenant, there are still spirits of exclusion and fear and isolation. So pray out the bad spirits and pray in the good ones: community, inclusion, joy. One way to do that would be to host a prayer and worship night where you live. This is a spiritual battle. So invite some friends over. Have a playlist of worship songs that you sing or listen to. Pray over every room in your house. Drive out everything that is not of God and usher in the Holy Spirit. Pray for your neighborhood. And there are resources that we can help you with to do that as well, on our website or the people in the lobby can help you do that as well.

And next week, we'll give you a couple more practical things that we can do to kind of fight this. But this week I want to be clear. Prayer is practical. Prayer is practical. Unless we contend for our neighborhoods on a spiritual level, this stuff sticks. Prayer can change a neighborhood, just like the story I told of the church in Honolulu that prayed crime right out of their neighborhood.

Some of you have heard me talk before about a woman who cleans offices at night after all the workers have gone home. And she asked Jesus how she could make a difference where she worked, because there was never people around. So Jesus nudged her to every night, sit down at each desk and pray for the person in that desk that they would feel God's love, that they would find joy in their work. She prayed that the Holy Spirit would fill that office with joy and community and cooperation. Every night she prayed that. Every night she did that. Occasionally, she'd leave a note of encouragement.

Well, one night she came in and people popped out of a closed office and said, "Surprise." And they said, "We just had to meet you because for the last year, the atmosphere in our office has been completely different. For the last year, we fight less. We are more innovative. We're having more fun. Even our customers have noticed that there's a difference. We haven't changed personnel, we haven't changed managers, we haven't changed protocols. The only thing we could think of to explain this difference is that you are here praying every night for us."



She didn't just clean offices. She cleaned atmospheres through prayer. Some demons only come out by prayer. We called this sermon series Just Neighbors, because Jesus invites us to be more than just neighbors, but to partner with him to make our neighborhoods more. Just so this week, pray. Pray, Demons of exclusion, isolation, racism in Jesus' name, be gone, and Holy Spirit, fill my house, my apartment complex, my neighborhood With your love, your community, your joy. Maybe even host a prayer and worship night, so that we have stories like the ones I've told in this sermon.

The stories I told in this sermon happened in other places. I want stories from here. I want stories from our neighborhoods. I want stories from our houses to give God the glory. In the list of armor, the armor of God that this passage talks about, in that list, belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness it is important to note that there is no weapon to protect the back. No weapon, that's all forward facing. Jesus does not equip His people to retreat. He only equips His people to advance, to be on the offensive against the spiritual forces of evil in our world. And no, we did not make those racial covenants. And no, we did not do redlining. It's not our fault, but it is our time.

Amen.

It's not our fault, but it is our time to advance and heal and bring justice so the world sees what Jesus and only Jesus can do, and be compelled to call Him Lord, bring his healing, his hope, his justice. Until every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Jesus, thank you that you equip us to do this. Thank you that you care about justice. Thank you that you are at work to bring your justice and your hope and your healing. Make us people who do that as well, through your power, not our own efforts, not the ways we think, but through the power of your Spirit, through the power of your Holy Spirit bring your healing and wholeness. And Lord, we pray all of these demons of exclusion, division, racism out of our neighborhoods, out of our communities, out of our town, out of this world. In your name Jesus. Amen.

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**Discussion Questions:**

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*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Introductions:** Spend a few minutes as a group introducing yourselves and welcoming new members to the group.

**Icebreaker Question:** What is the picture on the lock screen of your phone and why? If you don't have a phone with a lock screen photo, what is a favorite photo that you keep close and look at often?

**Opening Question:** Looking back to last's week's sermon and scripture...How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

**For Further Study:** View resources available online [www.belpres.org/justice](http://www.belpres.org/justice)

**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What injustices do you see in your neighborhood?
- How do you think Jesus is calling you to respond?

**Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing Group Prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.