

¹⁰ Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and his powerful strength. ¹¹ Put on God's armor so that you can make a stand against the tricks of the devil. ¹² We aren't fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens. ¹³ Therefore, pick up the full armor of God so that you can stand your ground on the evil day and after you have done everything possible to still stand. ¹⁴ So stand with the belt of truth around your waist, justice as your breastplate, ¹⁵ and put shoes on your feet so that you are ready to spread the good news of peace. ¹⁶ Above all, carry the shield of faith so that you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word.

¹⁸ Offer prayers and petitions in the Spirit all the time. Stay alert by hanging in there and praying for all believers. ¹⁹ As for me, pray that when I open my mouth, I'll get a message that confidently makes this mystery of the gospel known. ²⁰ I'm an ambassador in chains for the sake of the gospel. Pray so that the Lord will give me the confidence to say what I have to say.

Have you ever had a time in your life when *everything came together*?

Maybe it was something simple like your mother repeating to you over and over: *Haste makes waste*. As a child, and especially as a teenager, she drove you crazy with her *Haste makes waste* litany. But then that day came when you had your own family and children. You were rushing around like a juggler trying to keep all the balls in the air, only to discover that *the faster you went, the behinder you got*. One mistake seemed to pile upon another and another.

And in the midst of it, you heard your mother's words: *Haste makes waste*. And then you stopped. And all of a sudden, you **KNEW** what she was talking about. And so you stopped juggling, and began to slow down.

If you were blessed and fortunate, you were able to call your mom and say thanks. If you were blessed, but not so fortunate, you said something like: *Thank you, God ... tell Mom I get it now*.

Summer is ending. The children have started back to school. Many college students are also going back to classes.

One of the things that I remembered – and have often recalled from my last semester of law school, was the professor telling the class, *Many of you are going to be graduating, and you are understandably happy. But let me tell you what you are going to miss. For all of your life, up to this point, there has always been the new semester. Regardless of how good or bad a semester was, a new one came and it*

was a brand new slate – you could start all over. You will never have that again. From now on, there will always be overlaps; no brand new starts.

And he was right.

As our children start back to school this year, they will get a fresh start. What will they make of it?

After Joe Namath turned the sports world upside down by predicting, and then making good on his promise, that the lowly New York Jets would beat the mighty Earl Morrall, Johnny Unitas, and Baltimore Colts, in the Super Bowl, “Broadway Joe” became a living legend.

Then Namath purchased a restaurant in New York, which tended to cater to a rather unsavory clientele. NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle told Namath to sell the restaurant because it tarnished the image of the NFL. (Yes, things were different in those days.) Namath refused. Neither Joe Namath nor Pete Rozelle were willing to back down. Then one day Namath called a new conference, and surprised everyone with his announcement that he was selling the restaurant. All the reporters shouted questions. **Namath said simply: *I remembered a lesson my Sunday School teacher taught me.*** And then he walked out of the news conference.

Do you? Do you remember a lesson that a Sunday School teacher taught you – even though it might have been many years ago?

I do. I remember – it was in fourth grade – my teacher told us: ***Every day of your life you make an impact on the life of one other person; make sure it’s a good impact.*** I still remember that some several years later ... although I wish that I would remember it every morning when I wake up.

There are three things in particular that I hope that the children here at Saint Marks learn from Sunday School, from their youth group, and from their worship:

1. **I want them to learn that their pastors love them.** So when they grow up and move to Illinois or California or wherever, and need help, maybe they'll say, *Hey, I remember that the pastors at Saint Marks loved me. Maybe I can talk to a pastor here.*
2. **I want them to know that the Church cares for them and is a nurturing, safe place.** Then, when they mature and move to Oklahoma or Alabama, one of the first things they will think is: *I need to find a church. I need a place that provides for my spiritual well-being.*
3. **I want them to have learned from their pastors, and from the folks in the congregation, that wherever they go, God will already be there to greet them love them; sustain them; and care for them like a shepherd takes care of his sheep.** That way when they become adults – wherever they may be – they can say, *I know that God is with me. I can go to the quiet sanctuary within my heart and God will be there to surround me with love and with power. I know that I am a beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold.*

But, it doesn't ***just happen.***

I came across an article entitled "*From the Atlanta Prison*" that said, in part:

This is the story of two boys who grew up as neighbors and the best of friends. They were the same age and came from the same type of solid, middle class background. They were involved in the same type of activities, went to the same church and Sunday School.

One of the boys eventually decided that church and Sunday School were a drag, and he dropped out. The other boy stuck with it, and looked for some meaning in what the teachers and preachers were trying to say. That boy ended up a well-known, highly respected preacher in Atlanta. He has agreed to speak to this prison group today.

The other boy – the one who dropped out of Church and Sunday School, is the prisoner standing before you introducing the speaker.

It doesn't *just happen*.

Actually, I didn't come across the article entitled "From the Atlanta Prison." I came across the article about the man who was debating whether or not he should teach a Sunday School class. He found the "...Atlanta Prison" article, which made him realize what he must do – teach the Sunday School class.

It's not easy growing up today. It wasn't easy when I grew up. And, it wasn't easy when anyone here grew up.

In some ways, things are a lot different for kids growing up today. I did something the other day that I haven't done before – I watched "**True Life**" *the day to day life situations of some of the kids living life today*, on the MTV network. Before I realized it, I was fascinated by the dynamics of what was going on in these young people's lives, and how they were handling it.

In many ways, it is **VERY different** from when I was their age.

But the scripture that we heard today, also tells us that there is one thing that is constant – **our struggle is not against the enemies of blood and flesh, but ... against the spiritual forces of evil ...** (verse 12).

Of course, we have to be careful when we deal with this passage that we don't try to make excuses – like the old Flip Wilson comedy routine: *The Devil made me do it*.

In his little book on the Apostles Creed, Hans Kung says that we **must never trivialize the power of evil** around us. And **there are two ways** in which we so often do it:

(1) We **say that there is no such thing as "evil;"** maybe bad people, maybe bad organizations, but not evil.

Of course, when we say this, it is completely contrary to the Scripture we heard read this morning: **our struggle is not against the enemies of blood and flesh, but ... against the spiritual forces of evil**

(2) We trivialize “evil” when we portray it as some comic book character – with horns, pointed tail, and pitch fork.

The first way makes us think that we can avoid evil, by merely “keeping the right company;” and the second way makes us think that it’s not real at all.

our struggle is not against the enemies of blood and flesh, but ... against the spiritual forces of evil

- Evil is real.
- Evil is a powerful force.
- And, as 1 Peter 5:8 tells us: evil is found *lurking like a lion beside the door ready to pounce*.
- And evil finds its way into people’s lives in ways that the innocent least expect it.

How often have we seen evil sneak into idealistic-minded folks and organizations – (not the “*bad*” people and groups that we have been told to avoid) – and had its way?

A **KKK rally** was held in a small town. Good, righteous people were upset and protested against the KKK. Before it was all over, the “righteous” people had resorted to throwing rocks and yelling obscenities. **Evil had won the day.**

Paul Hill – you probably don’t remember the name – he believed that killing was wrong. And he believed that abortion was killing. He became so obsessed with the righteousness of his cause, that he ended up gunning down a doctor outside an abortion clinic. **Evil won that day.**

That is how evil wins against us – by getting us to take part in evil ourselves, mistaking the “righteousness” of what we are doing as a justification.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was so very, very right when he said, **The end does not justify the means. The means are always the end in the process of becoming.**

Evil is not conquered by doing evil; it becomes acceptable to us.

**our struggle is not against the enemies of blood and flesh, but ...
against the spiritual forces of evil**

It's time for school to start.

Our Sunday School classes are woefully lacking in students, because too many parents think that ... I honestly can't tell you what they think that is more important than the children getting a good foundation for the rest of their lives.

Evil is lurking all about.

I am genuinely worried. **WE** the Church need to be doing something.

And please – the next time you hear someone talking to you about how everything went wrong **when we took prayer out of school** – please, just ask them if they **spend as much time complaining about “no prayer in school”** as they do in ***making sure the school age children do get into church and into Sunday School, and working there to teach them to pray.***

I'm genuinely worried. **But I also have hope.**

I have hope **because I believe that God is in charge.**

And I have hope because I believe that God has called **US** – the **CHURCH**, to be the **BODY OF CHRIST** in the world today. And I know, that if we are willing, God can work powerfully through us.

I have hope because I have seen one particular group in this church grow and grow. It's our infants. And it's growing, because we have people of child bearing years beginning to come to this church – because they have heard that at Saint Marks people are taught that they are beloved children of God, precious and beautiful to behold.

And when I see things like that happen – that kind of love that is not wasted on arguing on what's the right way to go about doing something – but in just getting up

and doing something – then I know that God is alive and well and working through this Church.

We sing the song – Onward Christian Soldiers – it talks about marching **AS** to war. Oh, that we could have the fervor and excitement and dedication and willingness to sacrifice on behalf of the Kingdom of God in the warfare against the forces of evil that patriotic people have during times of military war!