

Armored With All Christ-Like Graces

Ephesians 6:10-20

Ordinary 21

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¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Last December, when the film of “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe” opened, a lot of people went to see C.S. Lewis’ classic story. As you know, it is a book filled with Christian symbolism. But one mother wasn’t so sure. As she explained, “I’ve read the book, and it ends with a battle. I don’t think I want my children to see that.”

At some level, we can understand that concern. Our children see plenty of violence on TV, in video games, and even on the computer. It shapes the games they play, and even the competitions they face in school. Sometimes somebody gets hurt.

But today we have a scripture passage that defines faith as a battle. “Put on the armor of God,” Paul declares, and join in the struggle against evil. This is how the apostle describes the Christian faith. Isolated in his prison cell, Paul knows that faith can be a comfort for the soul. He knows faith can be a lamp for his feet. But he also knows that Christian faith is often up against something. It can be a battle.

I’ve been spending a lot of time with the psalms. In fact, if you want the short answer to what I did this summer, there it is. On one particular night, I’m reading the psalms out loud. I think it was somewhere around Psalm 7, which reads: “Rise up, O Lord, in your anger; lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies.” (7:6) My wife blurts out, “Now, why does the Bible say that?” So I told her about James Luther Mays, retired Old Testament professor of Union Seminary. Mays says what God does with our enemies is really God’s business, not ours. For us, Mays says we have to acknowledge that faith itself has enemies. There are underlying forces that fight against our best efforts to believe and love.

All of the Gospels affirm this. This is the year that the church reads the Gospel of Mark. Fred Craddock says when you read Mark, it is clear there is another team on the field. Mark says Jesus got up every day to fight against the forces that damage human life. Sickness, poverty, oppression, sin, violence, and death: Jesus battled these things. And they opposed him.

If you want to believe Jesus was a nice guy or a warm-hearted teacher, go right ahead. Just remember that the kindest, most loving, most truthful person in the world was nailed to a cross. Jesus had his enemies.

And here's Paul himself. If this is the apostle speaking, he is writing these words from a prison cell. Now think about it. He didn't end up in prison because he had a lot of friends. He didn't end up in prison because he was popular. Oh, no, no, no. He is in prison because he loves God more than anything else. And his devotion stirs up the opposition.

And what about our own struggles? Not just with flesh and blood, but with the more sinister powers? What about the invisible skirmishes that we face each day? To say the right thing? To do the right thing? To become more Christ-like? I think those who have the greatest ability to grow closest to God are those who know how hard it is to grow. A lot of our spiritual life can look like we're recycling the same old stuff, and there's no progress, no growth, no increase in breadth or depth.

There's no question that Christian faith is a battle, a conflict with forces both outside us and within. This is Paul's announcement in Ephesians. And the question is how we're going to fight it. Or more specifically, what kind of weapons we're going to use.

We live in a season when some Christians want to fight other Christians. That seems rather sinister to me, but it is the reality. The right battles the left. The left battles the right. Those of us in the middle have to duck bullets from both sides, and then we're chastised by the extremes for not choosing up sides. It's usually a battle of words.

You can often see it right after one of our Presbyterian General Assemblies. This year, for instance, some headlines were screaming about a theology paper on the Trinity. One pundit accused us of renaming the Trinity as Larry, Moe, and Curly. Actually, if he would have actually read the paper rather than react to what somebody told him about it, he might have discovered that it was a thoughtful and generous paper that would make us proud. Some people want to fight with words.

Then there are those Christians who have sold out to the weapons of a consumer culture. They are obsessed with having the biggest sanctuary, or the best church, or the most glamorous leader, or the greatest influence, and they have the limousines to prove it.

In fact, just watch: we have an election coming up. Pretty soon, someone will try to tell us who the Christian candidate will be. In our lucid moments, we know that anybody who runs for office is imperfect just like the rest of us. But they won't be portrayed that way. We'll be shown another cardboard Savior, and told that if all the believers would get behind him (with such people, you know it's got to be a "him"), then we'll beat the other side. Some people want to fight with worldly power.

The surprise of our text has to do with the weapons that the apostle commends. Do you remember his list? The belt of truth -- the breastplate of righteousness -- the shoes of peace -- the shield of faith -- the helmet of salvation -- the sword of the Spirit, which is the living word of God – and prayer.

These are the weapons with which you battle out the Christian life: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, word of God, and prayer. It's an unusual list, isn't it? A violent world tempts us to use violent tools. But truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, scripture, and prayer – if we put these “on,” it's like that phrase from Harry Fosdick's hymn: we are “armored with all Christ-like graces.”

Well, what does the armor look like? Let me say something about these spiritual tools.

First, there's truth. In this sense, truth is not the bludgeon of a correct opinion, but an honest assessment of the way things really are. It's about declaring what is really going on. It's like an intervention with a person who is addicted. Truth is the small woman who confronts her alcoholic husband and says, “Your drinking is destroying this family, and we love you too much to let it continue.” That's more than her opinion. That's a description of reality. And nothing will get better until the whole truth comes out.

Or righteousness. Righteousness is widely misunderstood. Righteousness is not being right. It's being made right; it's something God does. A lot of battles begin because there's somebody over here, and there's somebody over there, and both sides think they are right. That's not righteousness. Righteousness comes from seeing the truth: that we are not as right as we think we are. That is why we need God: to make us right, to set us right, to move us beyond the blind spots of our own sin, and to restore what sin has broken.

And then come faith and salvation, two complimentary gifts from God. Like righteousness, these are not achievements of our own. These are assurances from God. At the heart of our resurrection faith is the news that God will win; that is the true meaning of salvation. We are already rescued in the grace and mercy of God, and everything will turn out well for those who love God. That's the definition of salvation.

We hear it in a backhanded way in the Screwtape Letters, as C.S. Lewis puts words in the mouth of an older devil who is giving advice to a younger devil on how to tempt the Christians. He says, “Never let the Christians see God's banners flying, because then our entire battle will be lost.”

And then Paul says, “Strap on the sandals that empower you to proclaim the gospel of peace.” I never thought of peace as a weapon, but it is. Peace is to dwell so securely in God's promised shalom that nothing ultimately disturbs you. It is to walk into a fiery conflict and know that nothing there can ever destroy you. It is to know down to the soles of your feet that this world is deeply loved by its Maker, to affirm that nothing can ever erase that love – such

knowledge is the foundation of peace, real peace. As we speak such peace, God Spirit makes it a living word, a powerful word, because it's true.

Or finally, prayer. Paul adds prayer on his list of weapons. Isn't that interesting? You stare down an enemy eye to eye, and say, "I am going to pray for you, and I am going to pray for me, and I am going to pray that we will know God's will and that we will do it." When we pray, we remember that the power for victory is not our power. It is God's power. To engage in the battle of faith is to align ourselves with God. It's not to align God to our side, or to declare that we are right. Rather it is to chase after God and ask, "What are you going to do? God, what do you want to do?" I have some friends who are going through a terrible time right now, and I'm keeping after God, and asking, "What are you going to do about them? They belong to you, Lord, so what are you going to do?"

I don't know what battles you are fighting today. I do know that life presents all of us with challenges. Each day as we get out of bed, we don't know what kind of arrows will come flying our way. But we take our strength from the strength of God.

In a few minutes, we're going to sing one of my favorite hymns from childhood: "Onward, Christian Soldiers." I grew up in a small town, so it took me a while to find out the hymn has fallen out of favor. I didn't know that church people were asking hymnal editors to keep the hymn out of their song books.

This was during the 1960's and '70's, when our country was mired in Viet Nam and good people were being assassinated, and government corruption was being exposed. After all, we Christians have a tainted legacy in our battles. Over the centuries, we have committed unspeakable atrocities against people who did not believe or speak as our majority did.

What did I know? I liked the tune, written by Arthur Sullivan who wrote those light-hearted Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. And even though I was a little shaver, it was kind of interesting to think that God's people would march with "the cross of Jesus going on before." They march, not under the flag of any particular country, not with the spear of the empire, but under the cross. That's the ultimate symbol of God's gathering, reconciling love: the cross!

And then I heard about that congregation in New York City. A member of their choir was dying of AIDS. His law firm fired him. His family walked away from him. His neighbors kept their distance. But the people of that church brought hot meals. They took turns sitting with him late into the night. They made sure he was comfortable and cared for. They stayed with him until he died.

At his funeral, what did they sing? "Onward, Christian Soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before." A friend of mine heard them sing it, and he said it was the most stirring song he had heard for a long time. He said it was as if the Christians were going to battle on behalf of a person they had come to love.

Every day, we wake to a world filled with conflict. Somewhere there will be meanness, hatred, hard heads and hard hearts. To avoid such things is to avoid what it means to follow Christ in a world like this. True disciples are always up against something, if only themselves.

But thanks to Jesus, our weapons have been transformed. We put on the whole armor of God: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit, and the word of prayer.

And in the power of God's very Spirit, we pray for the day, we work for the day, when the cross of Jesus shall establish the peace that God wants for all his beloved children.