

The Armor of God: Breastplate of Righteousness – Ephesians 6:14-15

Sermon by Associate Pastor Joe Davis

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I. INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Well if you'll turn in your Bibles to Ephesians chapter 6, we'll pick up again in our study of the last 15 verses of this powerful book, where, if you'll remember, Paul is giving us his final instructions about how we can walk worthy of the calling we've received. And the final guidance he gives us is that we are to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might, something Paul tells us we can only do by putting on the full armor of God.

So let's begin today by reading these verses again in Ephesians 6:10-18:

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14 Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, 15 and having shod YOUR FEET WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE; 16 in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 And take THE HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 18 With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints...

May the Lord bless the reading of his Word.

Now as I was trying to get a better understanding of the Roman armor that Paul would have been quite familiar with when he was writing Ephesians, I found an interesting website dedicated to the history of the Roman military:

romanmilitary.net. I'd like to share with you its brief description of the Roman armor and how it was used. It said this:

“Armor is one of the most important parts of any soldier's equipment. This holds true today, and was true for the soldiers of Rome. The technology of armor has changed, but the principle remains the same: protect the wearer during battle. While modern armor is mainly centered around protecting against bullets, the armor of Rome was designed to protect mainly against projectiles such as spears or javelins, arrows, swords, or daggers.”

“The armor of the Roman army...was mainly comprised of a shield,...and body armor that varied depending on rank and position, consisting of a breastplate and one greave, on the left leg. The [*shield*] was a curved oval shield made from two sheets of wood glued together and covered with canvas and leather, usually with a spindle shaped boss along the vertical length of the shield. It can be considered a body shield, and was extremely heavy... When a legionary charged with the shield, he would hold it with a straight arm and rest it on his left shoulder, then run towards the enemy with full force in an attempt to knock his foe over. He would then kneel behind the shield and fight from behind it.”

“Body armor of the...heavy infantry,...front-line soldiers, and...veterans consisted of only a ... breastplate, called a heart guard,...and one greave. The one greave was worn on the left leg, the leg that was exposed during battle. The [*breastplate*] was either square or round. Wealthier soldiers wore mail shirts that were very heavy... This weight was quite a problem in the account of the battle of Lake Trasimene, where soldiers that tried to swim away were drowned by their armor. The [*heavy infantry*] and [*front line soldiers*] also wore a bronze helmet with a ring of three black or purple feathers about [18 inches] high. This was to make each man look twice his height.”

So I think we can get a pretty good picture in our minds of the armor Paul would have been familiar with as he wrote Ephesians.

This armor was absolutely essential for protection against spears, arrows, javelins, swords and daggers. Without the armor, the soldier would be completely vulnerable and unprotected against the weapons of the enemy and would have no chance of success and victory.

But when you think about the armor and weapons of a Roman soldier, they could only offer the best of human-based protection and were limited in their effectiveness by the human skills of the person wearing and using them. Paul, however, provides us in our spiritual battle with an extra piece of armor that changes everything and makes victory sure even against seemingly insurmountable odds. This piece of armor brings God and his power into the battle, so that God's warriors aren't limited by human skills and abilities. And as we know, nothing is impossible when God's involved. This extra piece of armor is prayer...not just an occasional prayer offered up in desperation, but constant prayer expressing our faith in God and our desperate need for God in all things.

But I'm getting ahead of myself! Today we're going to tackle the 2nd piece of the full armor of God: the breastplate of righteousness.

But briefly reviewing, the 7 pieces of the full armor of God are:

- 1) Truth girding your loins;
- 2) Righteousness as your breastplate;
- 3) Preparation of the gospel of peace as your shoes;
- 4) Faith as your shield;
- 5) Salvation as your helmet;
- 6) The Word of God as your sword;
- 7) Prayer in the Spirit covering it all.

And if you'll remember from last week, in that list are 3 "having's," 3 "taking's," and 1 "praying": 1) having girded your loins, having put on the breastplate; and having shod your feet; then 2) taking up the shield, take the helmet and take the sword; and finally 3) praying at all times. And as we noted last week the having's are significantly in the past tense: having girded, having put on and having shod, then you are to take up the shield helmet and sword.

What I believe this shows us is that the first 3 pieces of the full armor of God are basic, essential, foundational things that must be firmly in place and established before we'll be ready to take up God's weapons and do battle with the spiritual forces of wickedness. While it would be very dangerous to enter a battle without a shield, a helmet and a sword, to enter the battle with no clothes or shoes will mean we won't be able to do a single thing to protect ourselves or even move around effectively for that matter. If we don't have these first three pieces of armor in place before we go into the spiritual battle, we'll be an easy, noticeable, unprotected target for the enemy...completely distracted with our own nakedness and vulnerability.

So today, we're going to focus on the second of these 3 essential pieces of armor we need to have in place before doing battle with the enemy: the breastplate of righteousness.

II. THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

A. What is a Breastplate?

First of all, what is a breastplate? We got a brief description of it from the Roman military website and it I think it's significant to note that it was called the heart guard by the Roman soldiers themselves. I found another description of a breastplate that described it this way:

The breastplate was designed to prevent a blow from an enemy's sword or other weapon from reaching a soldier's vital organs, particularly, the heart. It would be difficult to apply a death blow to the torso of a soldier wearing this type of body armor. A Roman soldier's breastplate is described by Polybius (vi.23) as "a bronze plate, measuring a span every way, which they wear on their breasts and call a **heart-guard** (*kardiophulax*)."

So we can definitely understand the importance of a breastplate. We all know that the best way to take an enemy down and finish them off is to disable their heart. Without the heart, none of us can survive. The breastplate also protected other vital organs needed for a human being to function. If a sword were to penetrate the vital area protected by the breastplate, the soldier would be immediately out of commission for good.

Knowing this it shouldn't be surprising to us that the devil is also targeting our spiritual heart in his attacks on us. If he can destroy the hope and love and sensitivity God has created inside us and turn us in anger and bitterness against God and our brothers in Christ, he's effectively taken us out and won the battle. If he can destroy our faith in Christ and convince us that we're not really God's children, he's taken us out and won the battle. We need the breastplate of righteousness to protect our spiritual hearts and vital organs.

B. What is Righteousness?

So we've gotten a good picture of what a breastplate is, but what exactly is righteousness? Some of you older folk out there may remember the days when, "Righteous, dude!" was a common expression. That was long before my time of course (☺), but I've seen the movies! Evidently people with no understanding of God's righteousness could commonly be heard proclaiming, "That's righteous!"

But let's try to move beyond that definition of righteousness to God's view of righteousness today. The Greek word translated, "righteousness," speaks of "integrity, virtue, purity of life, rightness, correctness of thinking, feeling and acting." In a broad sense it also describes "the state of him who is as he ought to be...the condition acceptable to God" [from the *Blue Letter Bible*]. I like that: "The state of him who is as he ought to be" from God's perspective. That's a great definition of righteousness, isn't it?

We all have an idea of the person we know we ought to be, don't we? It may be a quite confused idea of who we should be based on our background, how we've interacted with our conscience over time, and where we look for truth in our lives, but we could probably all come up with a pretty good description of what we think we should be like or how we should be living our lives. But the righteousness spoken of here is righteousness according to God's definition, not ours, and the only place to find out what that is, is in his perfect Word, the Bible.

So where do we get this righteousness that we're to put on as a breastplate? Is Paul speaking here of putting on perfect behavior? Is he saying that the way to protect our heart and vital organs in the spiritual battle is to make sure that we're always, 100% of the time walking in "integrity, virtue, purity of life, rightness, correctness of thinking, feeling and acting?"

Well, in order to answer this question, I want to take us on a journey through righteousness in Scripture. I've given you all a handout today since we're going to be looking at a lot of verses and I want you to be able to dwell on them and not get lost trying to look them all up. If you don't have a handout, raise your hand and we'll get one delivered to you.

C. God's Righteousness

We're going to start this journey by looking at the source and author and perfect representation of righteousness, and that is God himself. What does Scripture tell us about God's relationship to righteousness? Psalm 11, verse 7 says:

For the Lord is righteous, He loves righteousness;
The upright will behold His face.

Notice that the Lord IS righteous. It's an essential part of his character and attributes. In the LORD we see righteousness embodied and perfectly displayed. He also loves righteousness. It's not just something he thinks is pretty neat or something he can just take or leave, but rather he loves it! We see this also in Psalm 33, verses 4-5:

4 For the word of the Lord is upright,
And all His work is done in faithfulness.
5 **He loves righteousness and justice;**
The earth is full of the lovingkindness of the Lord.

What are the things that you love? If you had to pick the top 10 things you love in your life, what would they be? Would righteousness make the list? Well, for God, it definitely does!

And consider Psalm 71, verse 19:

19 For **Your righteousness, O God, reaches to the heavens,**
You who have done great things;
O God, who is like You?

The indication here is that God's righteousness is beyond our comprehension... way beyond what we've ever seen displayed anywhere else. "O God, who is like You?" Answer: No one! Only God is perfectly righteous in his character and all his actions and no one loves righteousness like he does!

This truth is also displayed beautifully in Psalm 36, verse 6:

Your righteousness is like the mountains of God...

When we think of God's righteousness we need to picture it a lot like this picture I'd like to show you now. It's awesome, overwhelming, intimidating and intensely beautiful.

D. Our Unrighteousness

But what about us and our relationship to righteousness? Well, what most of you probably know quite well, is that Scripture doesn't give us a very pretty picture of our own righteousness in God's eyes. Going all the way back to the early days of the Israelite nation, we find a scathing analysis of human righteousness given by Moses. In Deuteronomy 9, verse 6, the Israelites are told in no uncertain terms:

6 "Know, then, it is **not because of your righteousness** that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for **you are a stubborn people**.

Can you relate? Or does this statement only apply to those difficult Israelites? Have you seen any stubbornness at work in your own life? When you think about it, stubbornness is simply the fruit of us exalting ourselves and our wisdom and what we want above God's wisdom and what he knows is best based on his exhaustive understanding of all things. It's the symptom that arises from placing ourselves on the throne that belongs only to God, something that every human being has been trying to do since the garden of Eden. And if there's one thing we all have in common, this is it!

And Scripture tells us that even the "good" things we try to do in our lives for other people don't measure up to or achieve the righteousness of God.

Listen to the words of Isaiah 64, verse 6:

6 For all of us have become like one who is unclean,
And **all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment;**
And all of us wither like a leaf,
And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

No matter how good we try to be or how many good deeds we try to do apart from God, we just can't escape our self-centered nature and will never arrive at the righteousness of God by our own efforts. Our righteous deeds done in our own strength look like extremely dirty clothes to God. We probably look a lot like this: **[show image of Pig Pen]**. Would you want Pig Pen to do the cleaning in your house? Well that's a lot like how effective we are when we try to clean the spiritual house of our own lives apart from God. We just end up spreading dirt around everywhere and then we come to God looking like Pig Pen and proudly ask, "How did I do?" It's simply impossible for us, apart from God's miraculous work to achieve the righteousness of God.

In Jesus day the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, were viewed as the best representation of human righteousness. They're a great example of human efforts to achieve the righteousness of God, and we see clearly how God views the effectiveness of those human efforts in the way Jesus related to these religious leaders. They looked very religious on the outside, but he knew they had done nothing to eradicate the self-centeredness that was still in charge on the inside. Spiritually they still looked like Pig Pen.

And when Jesus commented on these very religious people that were viewed by others as examples of righteousness, this is what he said in Matthew 5, verse 20:

20 "For I say to you that **unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees,** you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

What he's saying is that you and I just can't get there in our own strength no matter how hard we try and how many good deeds we do. These guys were trying as hard as humanly possible and still they weren't even close. They needed righteousness from God, but they weren't ready to receive it because they

thought they were doing pretty darn well and didn't see any need for God's righteousness.

Romans 10, verse 3 describes the situation well:

3 For not knowing about God's righteousness and **seeking to establish their own**, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.

Do you see the pride and self-centeredness? They were confident in their own abilities, saw no need for God, and were focused on establishing their own righteousness. Though they were trying to do good deeds and an extensive list of rules, they were still just stuck where we all begin: focused on ourselves and sitting confidently on the throne where God belongs.

You see what God is accomplishing through the Law he's given is to show us right from wrong and how we can never achieve his righteousness apart from him. His desire is not that we become really religious and learn to keep all his rules, but rather that as we understand his righteousness and perfection, we recognize we can never get there apart from him, knowing the sin and self-centeredness that permeates everything we do and think. He wants us to turn back to him, receiving his righteousness and learning to walk in the dependent love relationship with him for which he designed us. He wants us to learn to walk with faith and trust him, rather than in our own self-effort and self-reliance.

Most of the Israelites failed to understand the purpose of the Law and made the mistake of thinking they could do it in their own strength. The Old Testament is the record of how that just never worked out. They got pulled into a works mentality, rather than learning to draw near to God in faith and receive his righteousness. Paul makes this very clear in Romans 9, verses 31 and 32:

31 but **Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law.** 32 Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works.

And Paul clears it all up for us in Romans 3, verses 19 to 20 and verse 23:

19 Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may

become accountable to God; 20 because **by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight**; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. ..23 for **all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...**

Trying to attain God's righteousness by keeping the Law is just not possible...by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in his sight...because all of us fall short of the glory of God. Our best efforts look like Pig Pen next to the awesome mountains of God.

E. God's Righteousness, Our Breastplate, Available to Us Through Faith in Jesus Christ

So I think we've gotten a pretty good contrast now between our righteousness and God's righteousness. And as we think about righteousness being our breastplate, I'm very confident that it's only God's righteousness that's going to protect me and you completely from the flaming arrows, swords and daggers of the evil one. There is an important role in the battle for the practical righteous living that God will bring about in our lives through his Spirit within us, but the only thing that will perfectly protect us from being stabbed in the heart and having our vital organs destroyed is the righteousness that is credited to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

Did you know that God's been crediting the righteousness of Christ to certain people since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden. One of the first clear statements of this is in Genesis chapter 15, verse 6, where an amazing statement is made about Abraham:

Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Abraham chose to trust in God rather than in his own righteousness and God credited righteousness to Abraham's account. Paul explains this verse to us in the context of Christ in Romans 4, verses 1 to 5:

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS

RIGHTEOUSNESS." 4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. 5 But **to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness...**

Abraham was not righteous in himself. He was self-centered and sinful just like us. And yet Abraham received God's righteousness because he believed God and trusted in him, rather than trying to achieve righteousness by his own efforts. And the fact that it was Christ's work on the cross that made this possible, even for Abraham, is explained to us by Paul in Romans 3, verses 21 to 26:

21 But now apart from the Law **the righteousness of God has been manifested**, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even **the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ** for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. **This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed**; 26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Here we see how it's possible that Abraham, Joseph, David, Daniel, Isaiah and even you and I can receive the righteousness of God. God had passed over the sins of those who had chosen to trust him even before Christ came to earth, because he knew they would be perfectly paid for by Christ on the cross. It was a done deal from God's perspective, even though for those of us bound by time it hadn't happened yet.

And this amazing gift of being credited with God's righteousness is possible, not because we deserve it, but because Jesus Christ on the cross took the wrath of God that we deserved for our unrighteousness. God, the Just, is able to pass over our sins and the sins of those who trusted him even before the cross, because his justice was satisfied by what Christ suffered for us on the cross. The Lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world made it possible for unrighteous people to receive God's righteousness as a breastplate that cannot be penetrated by even the most powerful weapons of the enemy.

2 Corinthians 5, verse 21 boils it all down for us in a concise statement, speaking of Christ:

21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so **that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.**

In Christ, we become the righteousness of God. But to receive God's righteousness, we have to accept the gift and we do that by repenting of our unrighteousness and trusting in Jesus Christ and his righteousness, placing him instead of ourselves on the throne of our lives where he belongs.

Romans 10, verses 4 to 13, says:

4 For **Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes...**9 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; 10 for with the heart a person believes, **resulting in righteousness**, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, **abounding in riches for all who call on Him**; 13 for "WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED."

God's righteousness as a breastplate and new life in Christ is available to each of us through simple faith in Christ. I know most of you here have already taken that step, but if there's anyone here who's still trying to be religious and achieve God's righteousness apart from faith in Christ, I'd love to visit with you and walk you through the process. It's really so simple. There are no magic words that do it. It just you admitting your sin to God and your desire to turn from it, and calling out to Christ to be your Savior and Lord, believing in his finished work on the cross. In doing that you will clothe yourself with Christ and his righteousness, being freed from the wrath of God and receiving Christ's righteousness as a breastplate. You will also be recreated at the heart level, given a new desire to please God, and freed from the control of sin and unrighteousness. Don't wait another day!

F. Our Call to Practical Righteous Living

Now I know there are some who have argued that the breastplate of righteousness is speaking of the importance of practical righteous living as believers in Christ. They would say that as we are transformed in choices and actions and begin truly living righteously by God's power, we will then be protected as with a breastplate from being vulnerable to Satan's attacks. And certainly we are called to practical righteous living as we grow in Christ and allow the Spirit to transform our lives. That's 100% true!

In 1 Peter 2:24 we're told that Christ "bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness." In 1 Timothy 6:11 we're also instructed to "...pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness." And we know chapters 4, 5 and 6 of Ephesians are all about this process of learning to walk worthy of the calling we've received. So please don't misunderstand me to be saying that God's not calling us and empowering us by the Spirit to live righteous lives. He is and will do it as we draw near to him and walk by his Spirit.

However, I know that the only breastplate that can perfectly protect me from the attacks of the devil is the breastplate of Christ's righteousness...the righteousness that's been credited to me through faith in Christ...it's impenetrable, and my security and forever acceptance before God is guaranteed and protected because of Christ's righteousness, not my own. Even though I've been recreated on the inside through faith in Christ and have new life and power in him, I'm still in this body that's been trained under the influence of sin, and I fail from time to time and my motives are often not what they should be. As I become more and more like Christ in my walk with him, it's true that I will be stronger and stronger in the spiritual battles I face. Yet still I would not want to depend on my own practical righteous living to be my breastplate. Only Christ and his righteousness can provide the perfect protection you and I need in the battle.

Satan loves to point to our behavior and our failures and tell us we're not a true child of God. He wants us to keep our eyes and our dependence on ourselves and our performance, because he knows we'll never measure up and we'll never be strong as long we keep trusting in ourselves and our own willpower and strength.

But in this battle, it's the breastplate of Christ's righteousness that keeps us where we need to be and provides us with the truth we need to fight back against Satan's lies. We can say, "You're right, Satan. I don't measure up in myself. But in Christ, I'm secure and I have righteousness like the mighty mountains of God. I'm in the shelter of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ and there's nothing you can do about it!" Amen?!

Yes, God is also calling us to practical righteous living as we've seen here extensively in Ephesians. He calls us to leave the darkness behind, be renewed in our minds through his Word, and put on the new self. And this righteous living will come about as we draw near to him, subject ourselves to the power of God's Word, and learn to walk by his Spirit. But if I'm depending on my perfect behavior to protect me in the battle, sooner or later Satan will find a hole and take me out. I need to keep Christ's righteousness as my breastplate, realizing that I am secure and a forever child of God, not because of my performance, but because of what Christ has done for me and his perfect righteousness that has been credited to my account.

III. CONCLUSION

I just want to close today by sharing with you a few passages of Scripture that shine the light on how the process of growing in righteousness takes place in our lives. And what I hope you'll see is that practical righteous living comes about through faith and drawing near to God, just as much as our salvation and new life in Christ did.

We grow in righteousness and become more and more like Christ when we walk by faith in him and not by our own strength and willpower.

One of my favorites is Psalm 37, verses 4 to 6:

Delight yourself in the Lord;

And He will give you the desires of your heart.

5 Commit your way to the Lord,

Trust also in Him, and He will do it.

6 He will bring forth your righteousness as the light

And your judgment as the noonday.

Isn't that where we each need to be? Delighting ourselves in the Lord, committing our way to him, and trusting in his ability to transform us from the inside out and bring forth practical righteousness in our lives. Delight yourselves in the Lord! Trust in him and he will do it. Now that's a great promise!

Paul expressed his perspective on this process so powerfully in Philippians 3, verses 7 to 11:

7 But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so **that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith,** 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Know the Lord as you delight in him. Allow him to bring forth his righteousness in your life as you fellowship with him through his Word and your conversations with him. He is powerful and will do it as you trust in him.

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; 11 **having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ,** to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:9-11).

That's my prayer for each of us here today.

So we've seen the importance of buckling on the belt of truth, trusting in and immersing ourselves in the perfect, unchanging Word of God given to us in the Bible, believing that its truths are absolute and unchanging and applicable in all places at all times. And now we've seen that we need the breastplate of Christ's righteousness to protect us in the battle.

Next week we'll tackle the final piece of armor we need to have in place before we'll be ready to take up our sword and go into active warfare.