

Shoed for the Gospel of Peace – Ephesians 6: 10 – 20

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We are wrapping up the series sponsored by the CBWC on “Why the Gospel is still Good News” while bridging into Advent to retelling that Good News of Jesus once more. The desire of the CBWC denomination with this series was to encourage dialogue in our churches around how we might engage our neighbors in conversation that could speak into their need to know Jesus. Too often we want to default to our actions – that our deeds speak louder than our words – but what are our deeds proclaiming?? Who are they pointing to? If we don’t have clarity in our own mind of what we want our deeds to proclaim, we will never have the words to explain why the coming of Jesus changed everything and why his story continues to be such good news for our world today. We talked about the benefits offered – unconditional love and acceptance, forgiveness and grace, purpose and community – but ultimately those things are the icing on the cake for being in relationship. All these benefits can be known in a human loving relationship – so what makes Jesus different?

For an answer to this, I want us to skim the book of Ephesians and focus on the final chapter of Paul’s letter to this congregation. Throughout the letter, Paul has made some astonishing claims regarding Christ Jesus. We read in Chapter 1:9 *“God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ – which is to fulfill his own good plan. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ – everything in heaven and on earth.”* This means there are no other legitimate authorities. There is only One, which is why we therefore live in submission to one another in love stated later in chapter 5. The letter goes on to declare this power and authority of Christ which is far above all other powers has not only raised us to new life with Christ but has also seated us with him now – right now - in the heavenly realms as God is currently creating a new humanity out of the old. We have been united with this Christ, with his authority and power – *for once you were far away but now you have been brought near through the blood of Christ.* And here we are introduced to the term “The Gospel of Peace” – because Paul seizes upon this theme of uniting all things under Christ – uniting Jews and Gentiles so that *“together we are his temple, built upon the cornerstone of Jesus”* (2:20)

In Chapter 3, Paul prays that the readers may be strengthened with God's power but also to recognize the "power at work within us" right now. We see this recurring theme of power – but it is a different kind of power than the world craves – in fact it is the only true power revealed in Jesus as life lived through acts of sacrifice, submission and service. 3:10 *God’s purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and*

*authorities in the heavenly places.” God is establishing his church on the cornerstone of Christ to unseat the unauthorized powers and principalities of the world. That power is rooted in love and we have this wonderful passage from Ephesians 3: *and may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. Now all glory to God, who is able through his mighty power at work with us, to accomplish infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.*”*

So, the good news or gospel of peace is grounded in understanding what power and authority looks like when rooted in love. This letter to the Ephesians is a reworking of worldly understandings and a call to stand firm in the truth of this good news: That Christ is the only true authority and all else is smoke and mirrors: That true authority is lived out in voluntary submission, sacrifice and service to one another – bringing full unity to the body of Christ. Thus, our battle is not one of flesh and blood, but it is against bad thinking – bad principles – bad manipulations of power. *There is only one Lord (one true authority), one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all and living through all.* This is again the Gospel of peace calling us to unity under one authority. Paul goes on to use the contrast of light and darkness – saying “quit telling lies – put on the new nature of Christ” - put yourself under that one true authority, under the one truth. Quit fighting with one another and see that this is a gospel of peace.

To “put on” the amour of God – it is the same Greek word Paul used in Chapter 4 to “put on” the new self that God created and gave to us in Christ. Therefore, this spiritual arming of the church is now putting into practice the lessons of Christ – putting ourselves in submission to truth. We as community are uniting ourselves with this all-powerful God which is at work in us now – in this very hour – through the work of Jesus Christ from the first moment of creation and will continue to the final culmination of God’s saving acts.

I’ve not really appreciated this text as I am a pacifist at heart and the whole image of war and battle is quite off-putting to me. As you can guess, the gaming industry makes little money off of me; leaves a lot of Hollywood movies that hold no interest and why I’m not big on the individual superhero. I guess I’m a child of the 70’s who still want to make love, not war, so this armour metaphor leaves me a bit cold. It creates an image of us versus them and we are right, and they are wrong and we’d better duke it out to get the upper hand. It is not a metaphor that we relate to very well. How often have we sung “Onward Christian Soldiers” lately? This, however, is NOT the message of chapter 6. I forget the common sight in Ephesus of Roman soldiers walking their streets and that Paul was taking a very relatable image for his readers

with this metaphor. But the metaphor is not “Be like them” but rather “Not so you”! See these soldiers – we, the church, are becoming the opposite of them. Rather than an image of aggression and false authority, this image on the streets will now become for you the daily reminder of where our true power lies – in the Gospel of Peace. We will be strong in the LORD, for our struggle is NOT against flesh and blood.

This is the heart of the gospel that we need to embrace today. Our struggles are not against people – those outside the church – and certainly not against other Christians that we don’t happen to agree with. It is not people or individuals, but it is false thinking, bad principles, the lies believed verses God’s truth. Satan is the Great Deceiver and his primary weapon is un-truth – getting us to believe in systems that are false and opposite to the ways of Christ. For example: Survival of the fittest is a huge lie – in God’s community we are to insure the survival of the weakest. The idea that power and authority is to be used to keep others down or in line or to get one’s own way is a lie – God’s power is always used to lift up and empower God’s children to do even greater and greater things for God. That is addressed in chapter 5 of Ephesians. There is no head or authority other than Christ. We submit to the gifts and strengths of one another because they benefit community; and out of our own giftings, we use them to strengthen and empower the other. *Might makes right or position makes right?* – the biggest lie of all!! It is these lies that we are to do battle with and break down – not any particular people or country or individual leader. Our struggle as a community of faith is to live in a way that is counter to the ways perpetuated by the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. That is why this is a cosmic battle and not a fleshly one. This is why armour is not for physical battle but to aid us in standing firm in God’s truth as God continues to reveal it to us through the whole complete story of Jesus Christ – the Word of truth that brought all Creation into being and then became flesh among us – that showed us the path to the cross was the same path to resurrection. And this is also why this is not an individual battle, but one that we take on together as community. There is no room for superheroes in the church – we will win the day when we work together. So, let’s look at the text again, remembering that we live in an environment deceived to the ways of God – lost to the truth as revealed in God’s son – so what is our strategy for proclaiming the Gospel of Peace? It is not aggression and we are not to launch an aggressive attack against these lies – but rather to stand firm against these wiles and model a life grounded upon the life of Jesus – the very Good News!

Standing firm requires community and requires all of the manifestations of God’s power working in us together, just as the Roman army formed cohorts standing shoulder to shoulder, our strength comes in unity and working together. “Be strengthened” in verse 10 is present tense – it is an ongoing presence and gift of God to the community of faith – part of the ongoing life of this congregation and the greater body of Christ. One weakness of the English

language is that we do not have a plural for you which is why we tend to think that everything is about the individual. But the Greek is plural all of you. Paul is saying “all of you together – all y’all – keep on being strengthened by the Lord. The task is never complete but is a life-long habit of learning to trust God for the fullness of life and love, and thus together we arm ourselves by seeking truth, by right living as community, firmly grounded in peace, shielded by our faith in the knowledge of our salvation, but ultimately equipped by the Holy Spirit.

The **whole armour** implies that we do not want to just use bits and pieces but need the whole package working together. If we claim strength out of our salvation and start wielding the sword of Scripture around like a drunken sailor without our feet firmly planted in peace and truth belted around us for support – we end up doing severe damage – slashing people with this Bible verse and that, while losing the context of God’s full word. **Why is truth represented as a belt?** The belt held up the toga so the soldier could move unencumbered by cloth. The "belt of truth" fixes in place what is necessary in such a way that it leaves the church free and flexible, able to walk or run, loosed from what constrains or trips the wearer. So, this would be a good home group assignment: discuss and name the truths that you as community live by. How does that truth give definition to First Baptist here in Lethbridge and how does it enable us to move more freely within the greater community of Lethbridge? For example – if Paul is correct that submitting to the gifts of one another is better than power over one another, how does that truth inform the way that we respect and treat one another, how our pastoral team leads us, how we participate in church governance, how we partner with other churches or social action groups? Name the truth of God then consider in what ways we actually live out of that truth day by day and how it counters what happens in the world around us.

Secondly, The breastplate of righteousness – that is a churchy word that I translate in my mind as right living - living rightly in the eyes of God. It is another way of saying that we live out of the truth that God reveals – we get it right. In Scripture the righteous are the Tsadiqim which is more accurately translated “just living” – it is living out justice, working against oppressive systems and actively seeking the well-being of others. It is not inward-focused as in “I am a righteous, upright, moral person” but it is outward directed – “I work for the rights of others so that injustice does not prevail”. It is depicted as a breast plate because the desire for justice must be rooted in our hearts as unshakable truth.

Thirdly, although armour is primarily worn for defense, you need good **shoes** to get where you need to go and where does Paul say you need to go? Wherever the Gospel of Peace needs to be proclaimed – and we must proclaim it – we need to use our mouths as well as live it out in action. Proclaiming the Good News of God’s truth as revealed in Jesus Christ is the path to peace – if we live out of the truth of the atonement, then we stop the cycle of violence by allowing Jesus to absorb all the evil into the cross, absorbing all need for retributive action in

the words “Father, forgive them”. That is really good news, even though it isn’t easy news for it again requires voluntary submission, sacrifice and service – none of which we naturally are inclined.

The Shield of Faith: The Roman shields were large and overlapped by a third on one side so that together, they became an impenetrable wall of defense. It is not your faith alone, or my faith alone that will win the day, but we guard each other. These leather shields were soaked in water and very heavy to wield but that is what quenched the flaming arrows. The united front and support of the cohort was crucial to winning the battle and our call is to that same unity – no room for “me and Jesus” or “I can worship God alone in the woods, breathing in creation”. Our personal faith is important – it is the ground of our very being – but it must be lived out in community because the salvation of the world is dependent upon it. It is our faith in action together that will bear truth against Satan’s flaming lies.

Now comes the only offensive tool offered – **the Sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.** It is not just faith alone – our salvation is also knowledge – the helmet protecting the head. We do not have blind faith, we do not have irrational faith – it may seem like foolishness to the Greeks or any others on the outside looking at it, but God’s word as truth actually works – the Scriptures make sense, especially in light of the whole story of God’s creation and design for life; our fall from dependency upon God to self-reliance, God indwelling his Creation again in his Son, Jesus to give us the design plan once more with the call – please trust me, please lean in to me and learn from me. See it in Jesus, believe it and live it through the Spirit.

What a rich text that I have failed to appreciate because the image of a soldier was distasteful to me. To understand that Paul is defining the counter-revolution of “not by might, not by power but by My Spirit” has opened my heart again to his call to the church. Be together, live together, work together for the Gospel of peace as revealed in God’s truth.

Paul closes with a call to prayer, and so I will close with that same call. Part of our unified front is being unified in our prayers for one another and prayers for those in leadership. Pray regularly for Bruce, our board and staff. And please pray for our extended Canadian Baptist Family. The CBWC has been part of your story and wants to continue to be in relationship for God’s kingdom work. We want to help you equip the next generation of leaders coming up and through submission, sacrifice and service – empower the mission you have here in Lethbridge by supporting and equipping our leaders. We are in this together and let us pray for God’s will to be done among us together. Keep alert – Paul admonishes – and it is prayer that keeps us alert to what God is doing among us and desires to do more fully through us.

Prayer: Song: Pauls' benediction: *"Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith from God, the Father of all, and our Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ"*. May we all be known for that undying love. Amen.