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Title: Dress for Success

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Scripture: [John 6:63-69](#)

Text: [Ephesians 6:10-17](#)

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Last Sunday, in preaching on the fifth chapter of Ephesians, I gave some background to this letter. In that message, I equated the book to a kind of common sense warning label – you know, those labels like a package of peanuts that tells you that it is processed in a facility that processes peanuts or the label on a folding stroller encouraging you to remove the child before folding it for storage.

Much of Ephesians reads like a common sense label that warns us about the dangers that lurk for a Christian growing in the faith. Paul wrote letters to the emerging churches to give them counsel in the situations in which they found themselves. He is giving instructions, many of which should be obvious, to these new Christians that may have been tempted by the city around them.

We began last week with the challenge from Paul to “Be careful how you live not as unwise people but as wise.” I suggested that Paul would want us to live as wise, worshipful, wayward people. In the fifth chapter, Paul was telling the folks in this new church how to live from a high level but here in the sixth chapter (and the last part of the fifth), he gets specific.

Right after the reading last week, he talks specifics about human relationships and now, in the sixth chapter, he tells us what we’ll need to make our way in this world as a true representative of Jesus Christ. To make it easier for the hearers to remember, Paul uses a sermon illustration in the same way we preachers today use stories in hopes that people will remember a nugget of wisdom beyond their Sunday lunch.

Remember, we believe that the Ephesians letter was written by Paul from prison. In the 20th verse of chapter six, Paul calls himself an “ambassador in chains.” It doesn’t take too much imagination to see what Paul sees – soldiers around him guarding the prison. He sees them, he sees how they are dressed and he makes it into a teaching moment for the church in Ephesus and for us even though, in our day, we would have more trouble visualizing Roman soldiers in uniform. Paul tells us that the accessories of these soldiers could be ways for us to remember how to dress for success as Christians by wearing the “armor of God.” He lists six such accessories.

Numbers one and two are the BELT OF TRUTH and the BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS. We know about belts. We use them for fashion but also to hold our pants up when we have loose-fitting clothes. I buy loose-fitting clothes and then after I wear them a few times they are no longer loose fitting but I still wear a belt just in case. For the soldier, the belt would have actually been needed to coral a loose-fitting tunic so opponents couldn’t grab ahold of the tunic and pull them down.

If you wear a belt of truth, you don't have to remember your lies. Someone once said that the trouble with stretching the truth is that it is apt to snap back and hurt you at some point. We normally think of truth as the words we say and it certainly is that but one can live truthfully as well. We live truthfully when we are who we say we are – when we live Monday through Saturday like we live on Sunday morning.

While breastplates are not something we usually wear in everyday lives like we wear belts, we still can visualize such an accessory. Baseball umpires and catchers wear breastplates. Hockey goalies wear breastplates. In a suit of armor, the breastplate was designed to protect the vital organs, especially the heart and lungs. Spiritual armor – a breastplate of righteousness – protects the vital center of our faith which is righteousness or, said another way, right living.

Being righteous is being faithful. We sometimes confuse being righteous with being self-righteous. When we are self-righteous, we rely solely on ourselves. When we are righteous, we put our faith in God and strive to be Christ-like, faithful in our interactions with others and with ourselves. Being self-righteous asks, "what will bring pleasure to me?" Being faithful or righteous asks, "what will bring pleasure to God?" Living with a breastplate of righteousness means that we walk what we talk – in our families, in our work, in our faith.

The third thing on Paul's list are SHOES. He says to put on whatever shoes will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. I have four basic kinds of shoes in my wardrobe. In my profession, the kind of shoe I wear most is what could best be described as a "casual dress shoe." I wear them throughout the week with my khakis and I wear them on Sunday morning with my slacks. I have sneakers – don't run in them, that would classify as exercise but I do walk in them. I have old ones for yardwork. I have boots. My boots are really good hiking boots. I bought them before hiking in New Mexico. They are waterproof and give me confidence and ankle support in uneven terrain. Lastly, I have slippers. They're comfortable and warm but likely would get me looks wearing them outside the house.

Each of my four categories of shoes work for a given purpose. I remember clearly one Christmas Eve service as a teenager and I wore ugly snow boots for the Christmas Eve service at church. My mother was embarrassed and was within inches of sending me home to change. Shoes give me traction in the environment that I'm in (hey, it was snowing that Christmas Eve)! Paul knows that we are not all pastors or preachers, not all teachers or engineers. We are to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ where we are planted. If that's hiking on a trail, we'll need our boots, if it's on a football field, we'll need our cleats, if it's at home, we'll need our slippers.

Number four on the list is a SHIELD OF FAITH. We talk about God being our protector. If we are going to be IN the world but not OF the world, there will be flaming arrows coming at us – likely not literal flaming arrows but arrows that disguise themselves in pressure from the world. The Roman shield that Paul would be referring to is not a small matter. The word he uses refers to the big, oblong shields that would have been used for two purposes.

First, they would have been big enough to crouch behind and protect the soldier's whole body. Secondly, each shield had grooves at the edges so that it could mesh together with the next soldier's shield and with the next and so on forming a wall of protection.¹ 1 When we live the message of Christ in the world, we have two sources of strength – our personal faith and the strength and faith of the Christian community – us here, the church.

The fifth accessory to dress as a successful Christian is the HELMET OF SALVATION. Helmets protect perhaps our most vital of vital organs, our brain. We want our kids to wear helmets when they bicycle. Our new college freshman has decided he needs a bicycle to traverse the campus of Indiana University. I've spent the last few days doing a bit of a tune up on his old Wal-Mart bicycle – adjusting the brakes, airing up the tires, lubricating the chain. When I take his bike to him, I'll be taking a helmet as well. I know that it's not cool but I hope he'll use it.

Paul says our Christian helmet is a helmet of salvation. Salvation is at the very core of our Christian belief. There is nothing we have done to earn this helmet that covers us. It is a gift from God made real to us in Jesus Christ. From the moment we said "yes" to be a follower of Jesus Christ, we have this helmet of salvation knowing that Christ died for us. How very true it is that wearing this helmet – this helmet of salvation – will save your life and your life eternal.

We have one more – but let me pause here to say that every accessory that we've talked about so far in our armor of God has been DEFENSIVE – belt, breastplate, shoes, shield and helmet. These five in Paul's list help us retain our stability in a restless world. They give us a strong footing and protect us.

The last in Paul's list is OFFENSIVE – the SWORD OF THE SPIRIT which is the word of God.

When I was in middle school – we called it junior high – I participated in sword drill competitions at the Youth for Christ building in Kansas City. We'd go up for Christian concerts but before the concert teams would participate in sword drills. If you have no idea what I'm talking about sword drills are competitions or games in which the teams or contestants try to best the other team or contestant in finding and reciting a verse of scripture. I wasn't very good at it – I could find the verse and even had memorized a lot of them but I didn't like the pressure. I know that other people who were on my team in junior high would be shocked to know that I'm a minister.

Knowing the word of God gives you the power to change hearts, your own and others. When Jesus was tempted, he would respond with words like, "it is written" and then would quote scripture. When God's word is in your heart and on your mind, you have it when you need it most. Pastors class students always ask and complain about having to memorize John 3:16 and the 23rd Psalm.

My response to their complaint is always the same. At some point in your life, you will find yourself in a tough spot. You won't have a Bible handy and you won't remember which scripture you need to look up on your phone. In that moment, to be able to say to yourself, "for God so loved the world so much that he gave his only son" or "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me" will be life saving for you. The word of God can be a tool of comfort or a weapon of judgement. It's been used both ways. I believe it is meant to be used and is used most effectively as a tool of comfort and insight and discernment.

There is one other quality for which Paul lists no clothing accessory – praying in the Spirit. We need nothing to put on when we pray in the Spirit because, in those moments, we are laid bare before God. Edward Markquart, a Seattle pastor, remembers his mother's morning prayer and adopted it as his own.

"O God, this morning I come into the stillness of your presence to begin this day with you, so that out of this moment, I may take with me a quiet serenity and strength to last me all day long. I have come to find wisdom, so I do not make any foolish mistakes. I have come to find peace, so that nothing would

worry or upset me all through today. I have come to find love so that nothing would make me bitter, unforgiving or unkind. I have come to find justice, so that I would always work for the poor and disadvantaged in the world. I have come to begin this day with you, continue it with you, and end it with you, so that this would be a day which has nothing to regret. Hear this morning prayer, for Jesus' sake. Amen."² To pray in the Spirit is indeed another piece of armor to uphold us and connect us – one for which we need no special article of clothing.

Whether you count it as six or as seven, the point of the armor of God is this: It is a question of identity. Who are you really? Do you think of yourself when you leave these walls as an emissary of Christ? If you do not, then these images are lost on you. If you just view yourself as an ordinary Joe or Josephine who lives a very ordinary life and comes to church for a weekly feel-good spiritual bath, then you don't need any armor. You can go back out dressed in the fashion of the world.

But if you believe that there is some importance to bearing the name of Jesus, if you are going from this room determined to make this a better world " a world of truth and justice, love and kindness, forgiveness and tolerance " then you need to dress appropriately. A belt of truth, a breastplate of righteousness, shoes of the Gospel of peace, a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation, and a sword which is the word of God – and...praying in the Spirit. May you be so successfully dressed.

¹ information on shields from Wikipedia article on "Roman Military Personal Equipment."

²from sermon by Edward Markquart on Ephesians 6 found at www.sermonsfromseattle.com.