**Stand Strong in Righteousness**

Text: Ephesians 6:14b

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**Scriptures:** 1 Samuel 17:38-49; Ephesians 6:10-20

Songs Chosen: [SttL] 399, 440, 505, 124, 216, 530

**Series:** Spiritual Warfare (#2)

**Theme:** The breastplate of righteousness is an essential protection in spiritual warfare

**Proposition:** Put on the righteousness of Christ so that you can stand

**Introduction**

This sermon is the second in a series about spiritual warfare which looks in detail at the whole armour of God, piece by piece. The Apostle Paul reveals the nature of the struggle which has been raging since our common ancestors Adam and Eve fell into sin and rebellion against God (Gen 3:15). He writes under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to the Ephesian Christians: “*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole Armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.*” (Eph 6:10-12).

In the first sermon we focused on the belt of truth and saw that the true truth of God enables us to be ready to fight the spiritual battles we face with - confidence in Christ who has already won the ultimate victory over the Devil (John 16:33; 1 Cor 15:57).

Today we look at the next item of spiritual armour – the breastplate of righteousness (Eph 6:14). I doubt if you have a breastplate in your wardrobe; but you may know what this item of clothing is if you have seen one in a museum or military drama. Let’s begin with describing a physical breastplate before going on to understand the spiritual significance of this armour in our text.

1. **The breastplate**

The breastplate worn by Roman soldiers was generally made of iron, though some wealthier soldiers wore a bronze breastplate. This piece of armour consisted of overlapping pieces of metal with connecting front and back sections. There were rounded pieces protecting the shoulders and the breastplate usually rested on the soldier’s hips, so the entire weight wasn’t carried on the shoulders. The overlapping pieces allowed for some flexibility of movement. This piece of armour protected the vital organs of the soldier during battle. The Greek word translated ‘breastplate’ is the one from which our English word ‘thorax’ is derived. The thorax is the chest region of the body between the neck and the abdomen, along with its internal organs. The Roman soldier’s ‘breastplate’ generally extended from the base of the neck to the upper part of the thighs.

In ancient times, people believed that the seat of the ‘affections’ or emotions, was in the abdominal cavity. This idea has carried through into our own English language. We speak of someone ‘venting their spleen’, having a ‘gut-wrenching’ emotion, experiencing a ‘stomach churching moment’ or sometimes feeling ‘liverish’. The ‘breastplate of righteousness’ protects the feelings and affections, but also the conscience, the desires and the will.

As we heard earlier from the historical record in 1 Samuel 17: when Saul agreed to have David go out to fight Goliath, he clothed David with his armour (1 Sam 17:38), but it was neither familiar to David nor suited for the battle he was to fight against Goliath. David said to the giant Philistine “*You come to me with a sword and a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied*”. David eagerly went into a physical fight that day with courage, and confidence because His feelings/emotions, together with his desires and will were protected and affected by the ‘*name of the Lord of hosts*’. He was spiritually well-equipped for warfare.

When you and I go into battle, we need to be able to stand against the schemes of the crafty, wily devil. He attacks our emotions so that our feelings make us vulnerable. He sows doubt about God’s Word “*did God actually say?*’ (Gen 3:1). He feeds suspicion about God’s grace. “*Of course God is love, but it is obvious that He does not love you, for if He loved you, He would not be allowing this to happen to you, you would not be going through this painful experience*”. He undermines our confidence and contentment in Christ by fuelling discouragement and despair. Welsh preacher and writer Dr. Martin-Lloyd Jones has written “*If you have not put on this breastplate the devil will cause you to doubt, or to grumble, or to complain and say hard things against God*”.

Once our enemy has begun to target our feelings and emotions then he tries to get us to rely on them. “*If life doesn’t feel good and pleasant at this moment, then that just goes to show that trusting in Christ is foolish and futile*”; “*Sin is very enjoyable at the time you indulge yourself, so it can’t be so bad. If something feels good, then just do it!”*; “*Your emotions are all over the place, so you don’t have any solid foundation with God. Throw it all away and come my way*”.

We need to be clear about our feelings and emotions. They are real and they are part of God’s gift of who we are. Jesus, the perfect man, is an emotional being. When on this earth, He felt compassion; he was angry, indignant, and consumed with zeal. He was troubled, greatly distressed, very sorrowful, downhearted, deeply moved, and grieved. He sighed; He wept and sobbed; He groaned. He was in agony; He was surprised and amazed; He rejoiced very greatly and was full of joy; He greatly desired, and He loved. You and I are also emotional beings; we are made in God’s image. What Satan attempts to do is to trick us into grounding our lives in our subjective emotions, rather than being grounded in God’s objective solid truth.

The devil also distorts our desires so that we tend to turn the good blessings of God into the very best thing or person in our lives. This idolatry always begins in the heart. Spiritually the breastplate protects this vital organ. Without this protective armour, our spiritual life is in great danger from the attacks of the Devil.

Are you wearing the breastplate of righteousness yourself? Have you put it on by faith? This breastplate of righteousness is absolutely essential in spiritual warfare, but what is this ‘righteousness’? There are two possibilities, and you’ll find Biblical scholars do not always agree on which one the Apostle Paul is writing about here. The first is the Christian’s righteousness, the second is Christ’s righteousness imputed. Let’s look at each of these in turn.

1. **The Christian’s righteousness**

We tend to think of ‘righteousness’ as being a general moral uprightness or integrity. In the unbelieving world being ‘righteous’ is sometimes seen as the characteristic of religious ‘holier than thou’ people. This can sometimes be self-righteousness; a belief in one’s own moral superiority.

In Scripture the concept of ‘righteousness’ is rooted in the covenant relationship between God and people. God’s law defines the terms of the covenant relationship. To fulfil these terms is to be a righteous person. In Scripture we read that “*Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God*” (Gen 6:9). John the Baptist was ‘*a righteous and holy man*’ (Mark 6:20) as were Simeon (Luke 2:25) and Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:50).

Yet we know that no descendant of Adam is fully righteous (Rom 3:10; Ps 14:1-3). In fact “*all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment*” (Isa 64:6). Even the best of our obedience to God’s good law is tainted. Our righteousness is deficient. The term ‘total depravity’ describes our natural lack of true righteousness.

So some say that the ‘righteousness’ of the spiritual breastplate described in our text cannot refer to the Christian’s own incomplete righteousness because this is no protection against the schemes of the devil. What do you think? Does our own righteousness protect us at all? We need to be very careful with our answer here. Think about the Pharisees who were socially upright ‘very good’ men. They fasted twice a week, they gave a tenth of their goods to the poor, they were outwardly ‘godly’ and very religious. Yet on the inside they were ‘*full of greed and self-indulgence*’ (Matt 23:25). The Pharisee Saul of Tarsus was proud of his ‘righteousness under the law’ – but after he came to Christ in faith, he came to see his own righteousness and status as rubbish (Phil 3:6-8).

When we think that we are righteous as a result of our self-assessment as being law-keepers we are very exposed and vulnerable to the schemes of the devil. As a proud being himself, Satan knows well how to bring us down by feeding our pride and self-righteousness. Know this; you cannot trust your own righteousness to protect you as you wrestle against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

However, there is a righteousness which comes from God as the Holy Spirit progressively conforms those who have been born again to become more and more like Christ. This process is called ‘sanctification’; gradual growth in holiness as described in Phil 12b-13 “*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*”. Paul has written to the Ephesians earlier in this letter about putting on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24). There is a partial righteousness which the believer possesses which is gradually and increasingly evident in the lives of those who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit (e.g. 2 Pet 1:5-10). Christ, the perfectly Righteous One (Acts 3:14) resisted temptation when the Devil schemed to entrap Him (Matt 4:1-11). His righteous character is progressively formed in the Christian although never completely in this life.

Truly godly, Christlike character in us is **some** protection in spiritual warfare for the child of God. Growing conformity to the image of Christ leads to greater confidence in resisting temptation. A more sanctified life reduces the risk of falling into many of the devil’s traps. However personal ‘blind spots’ remain in each one of us. This righteousness is always only partial and incomplete in this life. As Paul warns the Corinthians: “*let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall*” (1 Cor 10:12).

So in summary: we cannot rely on our own righteousness deeds – certainty not those which result entirely from our own works – they are all like a polluted garment. Neither can we completely rely on the righteousness which comes through progressively conformity to the character of Christ, because this righteousness is incomplete in this life. It is like wearing a coat of armour with holes in it. There is some protection, but there are still areas of great vulnerability. The righteousness which makes the breastplate a sure protection against the forces of evil is not our own, it is Christ’s – which brings us to our third point.

1. **Christ’s righteousness imputed**

In order to clearly understand and communicate the truth of the Bible it is necessary and useful to use theological terms which convey concepts that are revealed in Scripture. For example, the term ‘Trinity’ describes the reality of the three persons of the Godhead, but it is a word that we do not find in the Bible. Similarly, ‘imputation’ is an important theological concept in Scripture but is a word not found in the Bible.

In Reformed theology imputation most often refers to the legal (or forensic) crediting of Jesus’s perfect righteousness to believers by faith to that they are justified (another important theological term). In the words of Westminster Shorter Catechism A33 “*Justification is an act of God’s free grace in which he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight for the sake of the righteousness of Christ alone, which is credited to us and received by faith alone*”.

Imputation communicates that believers are justified (made right with God) on the basis of the obedience of Christ (both active and passive—again, key theological terms). By Jesus’s active obedience he meets the demands of perfect righteousness God has always required of humanity. By Jesus’s passive obedience, he pays the penalty of death due to humanity on account of sin.

The imputed righteousness of Christ is revealed in 2 Cor 5:21 “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*”. This is the righteousness which God counts to the credit of the Christian apart from works (Rom 4:6). It is a righteousness not of any human effort, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Phil 3:8). This imputed righteousness justifies the believer by faith resulting in peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 5:1)

Christ’s righteousness imputed gives the believer great confidence to seek the help he or she constantly needs from God (Heb 4:16) as they “*wrestle against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”*. Brothers and sisters, the breastplate of this righteousness is always fully sufficient and will never fail us. It is the very righteousness of God, the Divine Warrior, as revealed in Isaiah 59:17: “*He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak*”.

Brothers and sisters, because of this perfect righteousness of Christ, we can stand up to the accusations of the devil who is a slanderer. “*Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died- more than that, who was raised- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us*” (Rom 8:33-34). The answer is nobody and nothing can condemn us when we are wearing the righteousness of Christ by faith.

You and I, all of us, need to put on the breastplate of righteousness by faith in Christ alone so that we can stand in our spiritual struggle against the schemes of the devil. We need to put on the very righteousness of Christ and firmly believe that we are fully sufficient for the tasks to which we have been called in His strength and power. We need to protect our feelings, emotions, desires and will from the crafty trickery of the devil by relying first and foremost on the solid truth that God reveals about His grace, love and acceptance of us in Christ. We need to stand up for Jesus in His righteousness, not our own.

Young people here today, you cannot stand in the spiritual battle if your feelings and desires are not protected. Will you stand up for Jesus in His righteousness, not your own? Some of the greatest challenges to life in Christ can occur during the later stages of life. Many of our older members can testify to this reality. As we age regrets and self-doubt can arise in the mind. When we experience physical weakness and pain; when death stares us in the face, the devil does not let up his attacks, but often tries to shake us and cause us to doubt the sufficiency of Christ’s work of grace on our behalf.

Older members, younger people, all of us: are we fit for entrance into God’s kingdom? Is there a natural loveliness about us that God find’s irresistible? No. Never. It is Christ and Christ alone who makes us loved, acceptable, and beautifully attractive to our holy God. It is Christ’s righteousness imputed to us which makes us holy, guiltless law-keepers in the sight of God. It is Christ’s righteousness that protects us in the spiritual struggle against the Devil and the forces of evil in the heavenly places.

So put on the ‘breastplate of righteousness’ by fully and firmly believing in the sufficiency of Christ’s work on your behalf. If you have not come to Christ as yet in repentance and faith, do so without delay for “*Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*” (1 Peter 5:8). Put on the breastplate of righteousness and you’ll feel better the moment you rely on this spiritual protection. You will feel that you are not as exposed as you were and that you are ready to stand strong in the strength of the Lord’s might. Onward then Christian soldiers with the breastplate of Christ’s righteousness guarding your feelings, emotions, desires and will!

AMEN.