

“Armor of God”

Ephesians 6:10–20; Luke 18:9–14; 1 Kings 17:1–7

Are we prepared to stand firm?

The armor of God. As you tick through each piece, you realize that Paul is working his way through the typical armor of a Roman soldier. Belt. Breastplate. Shoes. Shield. Helmet. All of these are defensive, for the purpose of protecting the soldier. Finally, a sword, the only offensive weapon carried by many soldiers.



In keeping with old Hebrew traditions, in Paul’s hands these are all metaphors: The belt of truth. The breastplate of righteousness. Shoes of peace. The shield of faith. The helmet of salvation. And, finally, the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Stand Firm! Paul says, using this armor that God has given you. Against whom or what? Against the spiritual forces of wickedness as we affirm in our baptismal vows. Paul is more expansive: “. . . against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (v.12). The very words seem so very ancient and most unmodern. Yet, our souls respond, knowing the truth. Peter Rhea Jones writes:

In unmasking the powers, one thinks of segregation, apartheid, fatalism, the Mafia, addiction, bondage of the will, totalitarian states, a celebrity culture of glamorized Bad Girls and Boys, serfdom in the medieval period, attempted bribery of legislatures through large campaign contributions, and genocide. Depersonalization creates a long gray line of faceless folk who think of themselves as no more than a Social Security number. One thinks of Nazi philosophy, unbridled nationalism, violence, hunger, racism, obscenity, addiction, brothels in Mumbai, nuclear weapons, and tobacco companies. In the movie *Chocolat*, the indentured priest must submit his sermons for approval to the man of the manor. Later the priest insists upon the independence of his pulpit. Only then can the church stand against the principalities and powers. In this light, the Pauline vision is realistic and illuminating.¹

Indeed, Paul is clear-eyed. As noted by Josh Chatraw, Paul DeBlanco writes, “We have no language for connecting our inner lives with the horrors that pass before our eyes in the outer world” and illustrates his point with a brief passage from *The Silence of the Lambs*:

Dr. Hannibal Lecter is an imprisoned serial killer who cannibalizes his victims. In one scene, he sits straitjacketed in a Plexiglas cell and addresses the young FBI agent, Clarice Starling, sitting on the other side:

“Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. I happened. You can’t reduce me to a set of influences. You’ve given up good and evil for behaviorism, Officer Starling. You’ve got everybody in moral dignity pants—nothing is ever anybody’s fault. Look at me, Officer Starling. Can you stand to say I’m evil?”²

Paul could stand to say so, even as he hands the Christians the armor to wear in the face of evil: Truth. Righteousness. Peace. Faith. Salvation. The word of God.

As you can imagine, books have been written about all six; for now, let’s consider a couple.

¹ Peter Rhea Jones, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B, 2009*, 3, 377.

² Chatraw, Josh. *Telling a Better Story* (p. 115). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

Truth

It is one thing to know the truth, it is another thing to be bold enough to speak it in the face of opposition. God came to Elijah, gave him a bit of unwelcome truth and told him to take it to King Ahab . . . the dreaded, truly awful Ahab. It is the mid-ninth century BC and Ahab would go on to provoke God's anger more than any of the kings of Israel before him or after.

What do we know about Elijah? Not much. We know nothing of his birth or his life before his ministry began. Elijah simply arrives on the scene unannounced and we're told only that he is a Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, an area on the eastern side of the Jordan river. His name means "My god is the LORD."

"Speaking truth to power" is a phrase that's made its way into the American lexicon, though too often the power is in the eye of the beholder. A high-level presidential aide, upon assuming her responsibilities, told a reporter that she was there to speak truth to power. It had not yet sunk into her that she was now the power. We may toss the phrase around in our world but imagine that you stand before an ancient king who holds the power of life and death in his hands. Would you speak the truth to such power, even when it is a truth that the king doesn't want to hear?

In ancient Israel, most "prophets," at least those who claimed the job title in the king's court, were unwilling to be the messengers of bad news. 1 Kings 22 tells of hundreds of "prophets" in the court of King Jehoshaphat of Judah. The entire retinue told Jehoshaphat what he wanted to hear – that the king would enjoy victory in battle. However, one prophet, Micaiah, insisted upon telling the truth – Jehoshaphat would fail. Micaiah stood strong before the king, unwilling to water down or ignore the word that had been given him by God. Certainly, one mark of a true prophet of God was a willingness to tell the king or the entire community the truth they did not want to hear, regardless of the consequences to the prophet.

Elijah too is willing to come before a king and deliver bad news. Elijah tells Ahab that there will be a drought. At first glance, this looks like bad news that could come from any meteorologist who was brave enough to deliver the news. But this is no weather forecast. Baal, the Canaanite god, was the bringer of rain. And for people living in an arid climate like Israel, water was life. Thus, Baal was really the bringer of life . . . or so it seemed to Ahab and Jezebel, who had given themselves over to the worship of Baal.

Thus, when Elijah arrives at the king's doorstep and announces a drought, it is a direct challenge. It is as if Elijah says to Ahab, "You think your god brings the rain? Ha! My God, the LORD God of Israel, is going to bring a drought and there is nothing that your 'god' can do about it." It is really quite an "in your face" moment.

You can imagine how well Ahab took this "in your face" challenge. God wisely tells Elijah to run and hide from Ahab. He is to go to a certain wadi and hide out. God will command the ravens to come and feed Elijah. Elijah will survive the confrontation and go on to be one of the great prophets of Israel, a speaker of truth.

Righteousness

Simply put, righteousness consists of doing right. For you and me that means doing what is right in God's eyes, no one else's. Luke alone includes in his gospel a parable from Jesus about a Pharisee and a tax collector. It goes like this.

Two men walked into the great temple in Jerusalem to pray.

One is a Pharisee. Educated and much respected by all. He attended to all his prayers and fasted twice a week. He tithed scrupulously. Indeed, the man was diligent in all such matters. And he made sure that everyone knew it. As he now makes sure God knows it. In the eyes of the world, this Pharisee is upright and righteous, the sort of man embraced by the Lord God Almighty.

The second man is a far different sort. A tax collector, despised by all and hated by many. Like Zacchaeus (Luke 19) he is probably a rich man given his trade. But he won't even look up while he prays and all he will say about himself is that he is a sinner, in need of God's mercy. That's it.

One upright man of high reputation. One tax collector – about as far from upright as you can get. Reputation in the ancient world was about how you appeared before others and there was little in life that mattered more. Even wealth was gained principally so that one could gain honor and reputation.

The Pharisee even feels compelled to point out to God that he is far more righteous than lesser men, those robbers, adulterers, and assorted doers of evil. The Pharisee had always taken great pains to ensure that everyone knew he was righteous.

Sadly, the Pharisee has it all wrong. He is so concerned that everyone see and applaud his supposed righteousness that he fails to grasp the condition of his heart. If he ever did know, he no longer remembers that God's great commandments are to love God and others.

The scene of these two men in the temple is like that of a Jewish law court. The two men come into the room and the judge (God, in this case) declares one man in the right (justified/righteous) and one man in the wrong (unjustified/unrighteous). Who is declared by God to be in the right? The despised tax collector who admitted he was a sinner and begged for mercy. God saw in him a humble heart; not so with the Pharisee.

700 years before Jesus, the prophet Micah addressed this very issue. Does God really want fancy sacrifices, carefully constructed rituals, rivers of oil in offering? No – what God wants is that we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with him. Thus, Jesus pronounces this despised tax collector to be humble, exalted, and righteous in the eyes of God.

Truth . . . righteousness . . . along with the other armor, these are how we are to make it through a hostile world. As we saw last week, we are the children of the light, bearing the fruit of the light: what is right and true and good (Ephesians 5:9). As you read your Bible ever more deeply, you see that all this is woven into a tapestry of genuine, sacrificial love.