

Stand

“The Breastplate of Righteousness”

Ephesians 6:14b

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on October 17, 2021

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 01)** We are doing a series on the armour of God. The apostle Paul is teaching us that we are in a battle. There is an unseen world where evil spiritual powers exist and they attack us. This is factor for why life is hard. This is why we keep falling into sin even though we want to obey Jesus. This is why we struggle to love a God we cannot see and feel like he is far away.
 - Paul says that what we need most is to put on the armor that God gives us so that we can stand firm against these attacks. Really Paul is teaching us how to apply the good news about Jesus to our lives in specific ways.
 - Today he come to the second piece of armor we need to put on. Look at verse 14. **(SHOW SLIDE 02)** ¹⁴ **Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness.**
- Let’s get right into this. We must begin simply by learning what a breastplate is.

DESCRIBING THE ‘BREASTPLATE’

- The breastplate was one of the most important pieces of armour for the Roman soldier. Here is an example of a typical breastplate. **(SHOW SLIDE 03)**
 - The breastplate stretched from the neck right down to the lower abdomen. The point of course was to cover the vital organs and the bowel area. It is never good to have your arm or leg cut off but if that happens at least you can still live. If you get stabbed in your core, you will die.
 - The most important thing you want to cover is your core.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 04)** For ancient people the core meant more than simply the organs. It was the core of who you are as a person. It’s where you feel things and desire things, like when we say something makes me sick to my stomach. You feel it in your gut.
 - It is this sense that Paul is getting at. He is saying, ***“there is an unseen realm where evil spiritual powers are trying to attack your deepest feelings about yourself, your inner most thoughts about how you view yourself, others, the world, and God.”*** If these dark powers can lead your feelings to despair, or get you thinking God is always frowning upon you, then you will be defeated.
 - But Paul says, ***“God has provided you with a specific piece of armour, the breastplate of righteousness, to cover your core. If you put it on you will be able to withstand their attacks.”***

DEFINING ‘RIGHTEOUSNESS’

- Now, if we are going to see our great need for this piece of armour and be motivated to put it on we need to define what this word ‘righteousness’ means.

- The word 'righteous' does not have much meaning in our culture. It is used either to put down someone who acts holier than thou – 'well aren't you self-righteous' or it is used by 1980's surfers who say, 'righteous dude'.
 - So we really have to start from ground zero to explain what it means.
- In the Bible righteousness has a two-fold sense. On the one hand it means that you have been examined according to a standard and have passed inspection.
 - On the other hand, it means to be right with someone relationally so that they approve of you. Again, this is why English falls so short because we never think of 'righteousness' in this relational sense.
 - So putting the two together: to be righteous means you have been examined according to a standard and have passed inspection in the eyes of another so as to gain their favour.
- We know what it means to be examined according to a standard. In a music exam you are examined according to a standard. In school you take tests that examine you according to a standard. If you meet the standard then you pass the test. That is the one sense.
 - But we need to add the relational sense. So think of when a woman says "yes" to the man who just asked her to get married. If she says "yes" then it means he has met her standard in what she wants in a husband. He's passed the test. And now she wants the deepest possible relationship with him. You could say he is righteous in her eyes. He has her complete favour.
 - To be righteous before God then also means that you have been examined by Him, have met the standard, and therefore have his complete and full approval.
- That was all background. Now let's talk about four things.

OUR NEED FOR A BREASTPLATE THAT CAN ADEQUATELY COVER

- In the first place then let's talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 05) our great need for a breastplate that can cover us**. Paul is saying you need it, but why? To put it simply: you need a breastplate to cover over the deep flaws of who you are. We need something to cover our unrighteousness. We know we have not met the standard and cannot pass the test.
 - We know this for instance, because we are always trying to cover our flaws in order to gain the approval of others.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 06)** Just think on a very basic level. Imagine you are about to go on a date with someone. What is your greatest concern? To be righteous – to meet the standard in order to gain their approval.
 - In an effort to gain their approval, to become righteous in their sight, you try to cover up your flaws. You cover your bodily flaws by wearing makeup or by wearing clothes that flatter the parts of your body you don't like. You cover the flaws in your personality. If you talk too much you work on listening. If you talk to little you try to be more outgoing.
 - Our whole lives are driven by this need to cover our flaws so we can think well of ourselves and so others will find us presentable.
- The Bible teaches that this need to cover is the result of sin. For when God created Adam and Eve they were righteous in God's sight. That is they perfectly lived up to

God's standards and therefore had nothing to be ashamed of. They had no need to cover over character flaws because they had none. This even showed itself outwardly in that they were naked and unashamed.

- But that all changed. One day they decided to rebel and break one of God's laws. When this happened their eyes were opened and they immediately knew they could no longer pass examination and therefore would not be presentable to God.
 - No longer were they righteous. They were now unrighteous. They felt ashamed to be seen naked.
- What was the first thing they did when they realized that at their core they were unrighteous?
 - They sewed fig leaves together in an attempt to cover up their shame. But their shame was in their core. Fig leaves may cover the body but they could not cover over unrighteousness. Yet they desperately wanted cover and even hid themselves from God.
 - But listen now, ever since that day we have been sewing fig leaves together in an attempt to cover our flaws. Or in Ephesians 6 language we try to put on breastplates. We desperately need something to cover us because we know that before the eyes of God, of others, and even of ourselves, that we are deeply unrighteous.
- In our own eyes we know we are not presentable for we cannot even live up to the standards we set for ourselves. And if the eyes of other people could simply see our thoughts we all know we would fail examination and be disapproved of.
 - And then there are the eyes of God. There is a scary verse in Hebrews 4:13: **(SHOW SLIDE 07) "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."**
 - So first then we all have a great need for breastplate that can adequately cover us – something that will cover over our deep failures so that we might be approved in the eyes of ourselves, others, and God.

SECULAR BREASTPLATES CANNOT ADEQUATELY COVER US

- Think with me then in the second place of **(SHOW SLIDE 08) the breastplates we make that cannot cover us**. I am talking here about ways we try to cover up our lack of presentability.
 - I want to mention some secular ways and some religious ways.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 09)** Secular people try to put on all kinds of breastplates to try and deal with that inner sense of unacceptability. Some devote great efforts to their outward appearances as a cover for inner ugliness. Some try to patch themselves up with achievements in academics or business. Others work at gaining status believing if they become someone then they will be approved.
 - But all of these self-created breastplates cannot cover us for our good looks fade, achievements do not last, and status blows with the wind.

- Harold Abrahams, the British Sprinter who won the gold in the 1924 Olympics, is a good example of how self-created breastplates cannot cover us. His life was depicted in the movie *Chariots of Fire* along with Eric Liddell.
 - Towards the end there is a scene where Harold Abrahams is waiting to run in the finals for the 100m dash. He tells his friend that he is afraid and says, **(SHOW SLIDE 10) “I am forever in pursuit and I do not even know what I am chasing. And now in one hour's time, I will be out there again. I will raise my eyes and look down that corridor; 4 feet wide, with 10 lonely seconds to justify my whole existence. But will I?” – Harold Abrams in *Chariots of Fire***
 - For Abrahams being the fastest man on the planet was the thing he depended on to justify his existence. It was his breastplate to protect him against meaninglessness and insignificance.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 11)** But we all know in experience that none of these things can give us that settled confidence that we have been examined, passed inspection, and are approved in our own eyes and the eyes of others.

RELIGIOUS BREASTPLATES CANNOT ADEQUATELY COVER US

- The other breastplate that we try to cover ourselves with is religion. People who are attracted to religion are usually those who recognize their sins. They do not hesitate to say, ***“I have not met God’s standard. I know I cannot not pass his examination and so I will try to improve myself through religion in order that God might find favour with me.”***
 - So people say, ***“I will clean up my act. I will try to follow Jesus’ teachings. I will read the Bible. I will go to church.”*** You can tell if religion is your breastplate when you think, ***“If I just obey more then I will be fully accepted by God.”***
 - This of course was the way of the Pharisees. But really it is just another self-salvation project. Tim Keller who has helped me to understand this so well writes of Pharisaical people, **(SHOW SLIDE 12) “They build their sense of worth on their moral and spiritual performance, as a kind of resume to present before God and the world.”¹**
 - Friends, so many Christians even fall into this trap. They relate to God on a performance basis. They feel that if they are performing well in things like their devotions then God is happy but if not then he is frowning.
 - But religion is just another inadequate way to try and cover your lack of presentability, your unacceptability before God.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 13)** Why? You will quickly realize that you can never meet the standard for approval. You will never pray enough, never be good enough, and never serve enough. And the original guilt that drove you to try harder in order to meet the standard and be approved will only intensify in your failure.
 - You see if you rely upon your religious and moral performance to cover your guilt then Satan will easily defeat you by throwing in your face all your failures. Unless you understand the gospel at this point you will either give up saying, ***“I***

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, 178.

guess Christianity just never worked for me” or you will redouble your efforts and try harder only to fall into failure and guilt again.

- What I have been trying to do so far is to get you to see that all your self-efforts to cover over your lack of presentability are doomed to failure. They are all paper breastplates. So what then should you do? Are you feeling rather helpless and depressed right now? I sure hope so because the only way the gospel becomes good news is when you see how unrighteous you are and the absolute failure of all attempts to cover yourself in breastplates of your own making.

GOD’S BREASTPLATE THAT CAN FULLY COVER US

- **(SHOW SLIDE 14) God’s breastplate that can fully cover us.** The unique message of Christianity is that there is a righteousness that can cover you and make you totally presentable to God but it is not something you can create.
 - It must come from outside yourself. God must give it to you. Remember we are not simply putting on armour but the armour that God gives us.
- What is this righteousness that God gives us? It is the righteousness of Jesus Christ. There is perhaps no better verse which better explains this than 2 Corinthians 5:21. **(SHOW SLIDE 15) 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 verse has been called, “the great exchange.” Notice the two sides of the exchange. First, notice that Jesus takes your sin. **(SHOW SLIDE 16) For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**
 - On the cross Jesus takes the guilt of your record - all those ugly black things you have done that make you unpresentable to God, and he puts them on Jesus. So, Jesus becomes liable for your record and is therefore punished as if he were you. So your record is wiped clean.
 - But that is not all. An exchange goes two ways. So Jesus gets sin and its punishment but what do you get in this exchange? **(SHOW SLIDE 17) For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**
 - What does that mean? It means that just as Jesus got your record, you now get Jesus’ record and all that comes with it. What is Jesus’ record before God? Absolute perfection. Absolute righteousness. He has been examined, has met the standard and is perfectly approved by God. He is righteous. So on the day that you entrust yourself to Jesus, you get Jesus’ record reckoned to your account. God gives you Jesus’ breastplate!
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 18)** The good news of Christianity is that God will treat those who believe in Jesus as if they had done everything that Jesus had done. So you see the message of Christianity is not, ***“clean up your life and then God will accept you.”*** The good news of Christianity is, ***“God will accept you on the basis of Jesus’ righteousness and then he will clean up your life.”***

- Oh what good news! This is hope. This is confidence. My unrighteousness, that is so deep in my being, is covered in the breastplate of Christ's righteousness. This is why we sing: **(SHOW SLIDE 19)**
- **My hope is built on nothing less Than Jesus' blood and righteousness**
 - Blood speaks to his paying the punishment for our sins. Righteousness is the positive side of making us right and approved before God.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 20)** Do you know this freedom? Give up on trying to make your own breastplate of righteousness. It can't be done. Come to Jesus and receive the free gift of his righteousness.
 - Come saying, ***"I will take this free offer. I will give you my sin and I will receive your righteousness."***

WHEN AND HOW TO PUT THE BREASTPLATE ON

- Once you are a Christian you must realize that this is exactly where the dark spiritual powers will attack you because this is your core. He will try to get you living in a performance-based relationship with God rather than to live in the goodness of the great exchange.
 - It is for this reason, that Christians must continually put on this breastplate. We put it on in the sense that we remind ourselves of what we already have in Jesus.
 - So in our last few minutes let me speak to Christians about when and how to put on the breastplate of righteousness.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 21)** First, **put on God's breastplate of righteousness when you feel guilty.**
 - Imagine you are in that moment. You have sinned. The guilt washes over you. In that moment the accuser, the devil will come and say, ***"how can you call yourself a Christian and do such a thing? You knew better. Surely God cannot fully accept you now."***
 - How will you stand against him? If you try to put on the paper breastplate of your own goodness he will run you through with examples of how much you fail.
 - No, in that moment don't put on the paper breastplate of your own righteousness. Put on the breastplate of Jesus' righteousness. How? You say, ***"Yes, I agree I have sinned. It is terrible. It is awful and yes, I deserve for God to not accept me. But listen devil, the basis of my acceptance before God does not rest in my performance whether good or bad. My acceptance is always on the basis of what Jesus has done."*** This is why we sing, **(SHOW SLIDE 22)**
 - ***When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end of all my sin***
 - If you put the breastplate on like this the devil cannot attack for what can he say against Jesus' perfect record? All he can do is try and take your eyes off of Jesus and put them on your guilt.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 23)** Second, **put on God's breastplate of righteousness when you feel an excessive need for approval from other people.**

- One of the great areas the devil strives to bring Christians into despair is with other people. Perhaps others ignore you, give more attention and care to everyone but you, or they criticize you. When we don't get the approval of others it can drive us into despair and a low sense of our own worth.
 - You get out of this by reminding yourself that your ultimate worth and acceptance do not rest in other people's approval of you but in God's approval. I am not of course saying you have no care for others but that you do not place your worth in them.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 24)** Third, **put on God's breastplate of righteousness when your feelings for God are dry.**
 - Satan often deceives Christians into basing their acceptance before God on their feelings and experiences. At one time you may have had great times of worship and prayer but then they seem to disappear. At that time Satan will come saying, ***"Why don't you feel that way anymore? Perhaps it was all in your head. Perhaps you are not really a Christian at all."***
 - Now feelings are important but you must be careful not to let your feelings become your righteousness. That old hymn writer knew this when he wrote, ***"I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus' name."*** The sweetest frame of mind is good. Thank God for good experiences but do not trust in them as the basis for your acceptance before God.
 - In dry times put on the breastplate by saying, ***"Wait a minute, my feelings are not the basis of my acceptance. They come and go but Jesus' righteousness abides. I am fully accepted on that basis."***
- **(SHOW SLIDE 25)** Fourth, **put on God's breastplate of righteousness when you are about to die.**
 - This may sound strange to young people but listen, you must prepare now. Some people die in a glorious state of rapture like Stephen beholding the face of Jesus. But if you read the biographies of great saints, or Pilgrim's Progress, you will see that others find themselves greatly attacked by the devil on their deathbed. The devil has no problem with fighting dirty. He comes in their frail condition and shows to them how unfruitful their life was, how little they loved Jesus, how much they wasted. How will you stand against him in that moment? Only with the breastplate of righteousness.
 - You say, ***"Devil, you may be right that my whole life may have been wasted but my acceptance before God is not based on that."*** This is why we sing, **(SHOW SLIDE 26)**
 - ***When He shall come with trumpet sound
Oh, may I then in Him be found
Dressed in His righteousness alone
Faultless stand before the throne***
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 27)** So friends, the only breastplate that will cover your unrighteousness is the breastplate of Jesus' righteousness. Put it on every day. Remind yourself of the gospel and live in the goodness of the gospel.