

The Breastplate of Righteousness

Matthew 5: 38— 42

‘You have heard that it was said, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.” ³⁹But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴²Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Ephesians 6:10-18

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. ¹²For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.

Last month in family@church we started on a new series of talks, looking at the full armour of God, as described in Ephesians chapter 6. And with that first talk I surprised a few people by suggesting that instead of putting on the belt of truth, we were to gird ourselves with integrity. I don’t have those kind of surprises for us today.

Some people, looking at this passage, think that the breastplate of righteousness protects inasmuch as this is God’s righteousness protecting us from sin and death. That through God’s *justification*, God’s *salvation* we can be acquitted of all things we are accused of, through Christ’s death and resurrection. They would say that this is protection in a sort of substitutionary way — God’s righteousness protects because all the harm falls on Jesus, and therefore not on us.

Now, I don’t think this is *wrong* exactly, except that here Paul seems to me to be talking about the stuff that affects us in this world — those who are enemies of Christianity, or just enemies of you, or the things that simply make it hard for you to lead a good, honest, effect Christian life. And to illustrate this, I have a story that I found in a Bible Society magazine.

Revd Anatoliy is part of the Ukrainian Bible Society, and talks of going to visit the mobile air defence teams who protect his town in Ukraine from Russian attacks with anti-aircraft guns. He writes:

“Today a biting cold wind was blowing. I drove up and offered the soldiers hot coffee, which they thankfully accepted. One of them, who looked to be 60 years old and was standing on the back of a pickup truck, noticed a Bible on the dashboard of my minibus and asked: ‘Is that a Bible?’

“‘Yes,’ I replied. Then he said, ‘My grandmother used to read it to me when I was a kid. I’ve been looking for a Bible for a long time, because my heart is heavy.’ At that moment the other soldiers called him to help reload a machine gun.

“‘Can I have a Bible?’ He asked. ‘But I don’t have any money on me to pay for it.’

“I quickly handed him the Bible, as another air raid began. the man took the bible and kissed it very sincerely. Hastily taking it from my hands, he removed his hat, recognising the value of the book.”

And then moments later, they had gone their separate ways.

I found that very moving. War is very damaging to your heart and soul, and this man knew it. He knew he needed God’s word by him, God’s righteousness by him, and, I think the powerful stories that the Bible is full of, to guard his heart from what was being done to him, and what he was being asked to do.

Sin, ‘badness’, great and small is never too far away. We see it in greed and selfishness, in anger, and in cold-heartedness. With all this around we all need to see goodness, and patterns of how to be good, to protect us from succumbing to these bad influences.

When Paul talks about the breastplate of righteousness, I think of ‘putting on Jesus’ — almost like putting on dressing up kit — because if we can look like Jesus, we will be doing the right thing, and saying and thinking the right thing, and *that* will guard us and protect us. We put on the breastplate of righteousness by *imitating Jesus*, and if we do this enough, we’re no longer just dressing up and acting — we’ve developed the instinct to be kind, compassionate and generous all the time.

How do we do that? The funny thing is that while Paul talks about putting on armour like we’re going in to combat, I really think he’s doing this as a way to get our thoughts away from fighting.

A lot of the films we watch have heroes and villains, goodies and baddies and while we know that the villains are bad because they want world domination and they’re not very nice to people, the heroes have to be a bit like that too. They use guns, or fists or superpowers to fight the villains.

But when Paul talks about putting on the armour of God, he really doesn’t think you’re going to get into a fight. Paul is using this only as picture language, because he would rather die than hurt anyone, and he expects the same of you. Why am I so sure of this? Because Jesus combated evil by dying, rather than doing any violence himself.

In fact one of the famous things Jesus said, is that instead of an eye for an eye, instead of paying back evil for evil, if someone hits you on the right cheek, you should offer the left cheek. Imagine that! Imagine your favourite superhero never once hitting anyone, but just offering the other cheek!

‘An eye for an eye’ just leaves people slugging it out, punch after punch. But if you can get hit but not hit back, you’re not making the violence worse. You’re stopping it. You’re making the violent person feel just a little bit bad. In fact, what Jesus is suggesting is actually a clever way of telling the other person you are their equal. You see, for right handed people a blow to the right cheek would have to be a back-handed slap. That’s what Jesus is talking about. And in Jesus’s day if someone slapped you with the back of the hand, they were looking down on you — like a master slapping a slave, or a Roman slapping a Jew. But if you offer the other cheek it’s inviting a punch. And a punch was what equals gave each other. If the person who slaps you hits again, he’s just admitted that you are his equal — which means that the first blow was unjust and he knows it!

The other examples Jesus gives do the same thing — they reassert your dignity without violence.

This example was really relevant to the people Jesus was talking to at the sermon the mount — Jesus spoke to downtrodden people in a violent world.

What do we do? How can we turn Jesus’s righteousness, his goodness, into our own, to protect our hearts? I think we keep trying to be as gentle and as peaceful as Jesus, as much as possible. Ask yourself ‘What would Jesus do?’ — especially when you’re feeling hurt by someone. Hopefully people aren’t giving you backhanded slaps often, but if someone says something unkind, you may get further saying ‘that was unkind and I don’t deserve that,’ than responding in kind.

Here’s a final thought. One of the devil’s favourite ways to attack people is by accusing them. Undermining them. We all do the wrong thing, we all have our unfeeling moments, so his accusations often do stick to some extent. But if you ‘put on’ God’s righteousness — firstly by accepting God’s grace and secondly by imitating Jesus — the devil won’t have much to get at, and in the end, even under pressure, your heart will be safe and you will be good.

Amen.