

ALL DRESSED UP

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Ephesians 6:10-20

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When Edgar Allen Poe was a young man, he was a cadet at West Point. But he didn't really like it there. He didn't like all the rules, and all the training he had to go through, so one day, when all the cadets were supposed to turn out in formation on the parade grounds, and march before the generals, Edgar Allan Poe checked his rule book to find out what the dress code was for the occasion. It said that he was supposed to wear white gloves and a white belt. So that's what he put on: white gloves and a white belt . . . and NOTHING else! And when the military commanders saw him out there on the parade grounds, they promptly threw him out of the school. Which is what he wanted anyway!

It is awful to think of facing the world naked. Why do we wear clothes, anyway? Have you ever thought of that? There are really only two reasons why we wear clothes, and they both start with the letter "f." One is FUNCTION, and the other is FASHION. We wear clothes for privacy and to protect us from the elements. That's function. For example, we wear shoes to keep our feet from getting hurt.

A first-grade teacher tells about the time one of her students came to school, and he had his left shoe on his right foot, and his right shoe on his left foot. The teacher told him that he had his shoes on the wrong feet. He looked up at his teacher, and he burst into tears. He said, "But teacher, these are the only feet I have!" We wear shoes to protect our feet. We wear coats to keep us warm. Clothes keep us warm and dry and protect us from hurting ourselves. They also make a statement about who we are and how we feel about ourselves. All of this

and more is what the Apostle Paul has² in mind when he tells us to put on the armor of God.

The imagery is quite vivid. Christians are those who are going out into the world to do battle against evil. Thus we must dress as soldiers. The soldier Paul has in mind was a first-century soldier who were often fighting out in the open.

Now, Paul knew a lot about the business of soldiers, and he knew a lot about what they wore for their business. While Paul is writing these words, he's got a chain around his right wrist, and the other end of the chain is attached to the left wrist of a soldier. Paul mentions that chain in verse 20 of this chapter. He says that he's a man in chains. And that means that he's chained to a Roman soldier. And if Paul were that close to a soldier every day, he would certainly know what soldiers wear for their jobs. So he calls us soldiers in God's army, fighting evil around us every day. And in order to do that, said Paul, we should put on six pieces of clothing. Let me describe them briefly for you.

First, says Paul, there's the **BELT OF TRUTH AND THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS**. The belt that Paul's talking about here isn't meant to hold up a soldier's pants. but to **keep all his clothes trim in battle**. To keep his loose tunic tight so he wouldn't get pulled down by the enemy. And Paul says, we must also wear a belt - **the belt of truth**. If you wear the belt of truth, you don't give your opponent something to grab hold of. "The trouble with stretching the truth," someone has said, "is that it's apt to snap back." **A belt of truth and a breastplate of righteousness.**

Its not difficult for us to visualize a ³ "**breastplate of righteousness.**" It's like what a goalie wears in hockey or the plate the umpire in baseball. They wear protection over the top part of their body against hockey pucks and baseballs. Roman soldiers wore a smaller breastplate usually made of metal or thick leather. And it was meant to protect their hearts and lungs and stomachs from injuries. **Truth and righteousness.** Those are the belt and the breastplate of the Christian. There is no place for the deception and lies in Christian living. Living out our faith is serious business. We are soldiers of Christ. When we take seriously our task as soldiers of Christ, it shows in our business practices and in how we treat our families. It shows in how we treat people of other religions and other races. **Integrity is the word.** A soldier of Christ wears a belt of truth and a breastplate of righteousness.

The third and fourth pieces of clothing we should wear, says Paul, are the **SHOES OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE AND THE SHIELD OF FAITH.** A Roman soldier's boots were supposed to be sturdy and grip well on all surfaces. When he wore his boots, he didn't worry about keeping his footing--just as the Gospel gives us firm footing as we seek to live for Christ. The Roman shield that Paul refers to here isn't just a small, personal shield. Paul uses a word that refers to the big, oblong shields that the Roman soldiers used for two purposes. On the one hand, they were big enough so that if the soldier crouched behind it, his whole body was protected from the swords and the spears that were thrown at him by his enemies. But the second thing about his shield was this: each shield had grooves at the edges so that it could be fitted with the next soldier's shield.

And his with the next soldier's shield.⁴ And so on. And then, what you have is a whole wall of protection! Thus when the follower of Christ sets out to live the message of Christ, he or she has two sources of strength: personal faith in God and the strength of Christian community--the church.

George MacDonald, in one of his great children's stories, told about a girl who grew up in a messy home, where everyone was always angry, mean and selfish. Her hair never got brushed, so they called her Tangle. And her clothes never were cleaned, even though they were of the typical fashions in her world. One day Tangle was sent away and she was left alone and hungry in the forest. She would have died, if she hadn't been led by a kind bird to a house where she met a kind woman who took her in. She gave Tangle delicious meal and washed Tangle's clothes. And she gave Tangle a place to sleep and when Tangle woke up the next morning, she sent her on a grand journey, with many strange experiences. And her new clothes helped her along the way. Till she finally came to a palace so beautiful, that she stayed there forever.

But MacDonald's story is really not just about a little girl at all. He is writing about us. He is talking about the homes we have in this world, not just our homes, but the home of this world itself, which is often mean, and ugly, and unkind. It can make us feel dirty and alone and helpless. But there's a kind lady in this world. She's the Church! The Church of Jesus Christ! And the Church bathes us in the waters of baptism. And the Church feeds us with the Word of God and sacrament. And the Church helps us to put on these clothes that Paul talks about. And the Church sends us on many adventures. Till one day we find

ourselves led into the very palaces of ⁵God! It's a wonderful story! And it's happening to you and to me right now! But here's the thing: we're still traveling with Tangle. **We haven't yet arrived at the palace. And what we need to help us along is the clothing that the church can give.** The belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness. The shoes of the Gospel of Peace and the shield of faith.

Pieces of clothing number five and six, according to Paul, are the **HELMET OF SALVATION AND THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT WHICH IS THE WORD OF GOD.** You know how important a helmet is. We wear helmets to protect our most vital organ--the brain. The helmet of salvation is our ultimate protection. It is the sense of security we have that we are surrounded by God's love.

The sword of the Spirit, Paul tells us, is the word of God. ***According to many scholars, when the "word of God" is used in the New Testament it does not refer to just the Bible. After all, the sacred writings were not gathered into the collection we know as the Bible until much later. Generally, the "word of God" refers to the "word God gives us to speak," especially in the time of crises.*** ⁽¹⁾

I pray we can all wield the sword of the spirit letting God give us the words to speak in times of crisis and challenges.

So the point of the armor of God is a question of identity. Who are we really? Do we think of ourselves when we leave these walls as a representative of Christ? **If not, then these images are lost on us.** If we just view ourselves as ordinary folks who live very ordinary lives and come to church for a weekly feel-good spiritual feeling, then we don't need any armor. We can go back out

dressed in the fashion of the world. But⁶ if we believe that there is some importance to bearing the name of Jesus, if we are going out from worship determined to make this a better world--a world of truth and justice, love and kindness, forgiveness and tolerance--then we 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.

When Queen Victoria ruled in England, she had several daughters. And her daughters were just like girls are today. They went to school, and saw the latest fashions, and they wanted to wear their dresses just like the girls down the street. And so they'd come shouting to their mom, who just happened to be the queen of the British Empire. And they'd tell her they wanted to wear their clothes like this and their hair like that. And she stopped them short one day. She said to them: "You are the daughters of the Queen, And the Queen's daughters do not follow fads. They establish fashion!"

And that's a good word for us. We are to live in world but not to be of world. We are to be trend-setters and difference-makers until that day comes when this world becomes the kingdom of our God--a kingdom of peace, justice, individual dignity under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Have we got our armor? Then, forward, march!

1. THE INTERPRETER'S BIBLE, Volume 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), p. 744.