

Putting on the Breastplate of Righteousness - 3

The Christian's Armour

By Dr. Joel Beeke

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Heritage Reformed Congregation of Grand Rapids

540 Crescent St NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503

Website: www.hnrc.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/hnrc

As you perhaps recall, friends, we have been looking at Paul's great admonition to the Ephesians to put on the Christian armor and to fight the good fight of faith from that classic Ephesians 6:10-20 passage. We looked once at the framework and the need to do battle and what it means to put on the whole armor of God. And then last time we began to look piece by piece at the individual pieces of armor with which God outfits Christian soldiers. So last time we looked at the need to wear the girdle or the belt of truth from the beginning of verse 14. And this afternoon, then, we want to look at the latter part of verse 14. But to grasp the whole sentence, we need to read the first part as well.

Stand therefore, having on the breastplate of righteousness. With God's help we want to look at this Christian soldier putting on the breastplate of righteousness. We want to do that in three thoughts. First, what this breastplate is. Second, its sure protection. And third, its blessed fruit. Christian soldier, having on the breastplate of righteousness, what it is, its sure protection, and its blessed fruit.

Well then, what does Paul mean by this breastplate of righteousness? Well, in those days, soldiers often wore a breastplate made of metal, sometimes of very tough leather, that would cover their front parts, their chest and their abdomen, as a kind of, we would say today, bulletproof vest, so that weapons thrown at them might not penetrate them. The breastplate of righteousness was always considered to be a very important piece of armor, because it really protected the soldier and his whole abdominal cavity. The organs in the abdominal cavity are of course vital for our life. And it was so that among the ancient peoples of the earth, including Israel, a great deal of nostalgic importance was attributed to those internal organs, particularly the heart and the liver. You can read that in many books of ancient times that the ancients believed that these organs were the seat of the affections.

Now, that means that when they experienced different feelings and different emotions, joy, anger, sorrow, they believed that these things originated from certain organs. All of which are protected by this breastplate of righteousness. Now it really doesn't concern us here to today whether they were scientifically correct in any respect, but the important thing is that this is the way the people of that time looked at it. This is part of what we might call a biblical psychology outlook on life, and the apostle Paul makes use of this psychology to teach us several important lessons, spiritual lessons.

He is telling us that believers must put on this breastplate to protect a very vital part of their lives against the attacks of Satan. And certainly, in this conflict with Satan, in the holy war with Satan, some of the most powerful, invisible challenges that make us vulnerable reside in this whole area of our feelings and our emotions. Therefore, we also need in our feelings and our emotions a strong protection. And Paul is recommending here to us the breastplate of righteousness.

Now we need to ask then, not only what Paul means by breastplate, but we also need to ask, "What does he mean by righteousness?" And then the answer is very simple, and very plain, very profound. Paul is referring of course to that alien righteousness as Martin Luther put it. It comes from outside of us, and it is the basis of our salvation. The righteousness that comes through God's own son in His perfect obedience. In other words, the righteousness of Jesus. It is only when we are protected by His righteousness that we can withstand all the devices and buffetings that Satan will try to use to get us to stumble in this whole area of our emotions, and our feelings, and our experiences.

Well Paul describes that righteousness in a powerful way in Philippians chapter 3. He first in that chapter, by the way, describes his own righteousness, or what he thought was his righteousness. He says, "If any man thinks that he has whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more." In other words, if we are going to establish righteousness on the basis of who we are, and not on the basis of who Christ is, then I am willing to go head to head with any man around. I have all of the credentials. I am ready to enter into such competition. Look at my qualifications, he says, "Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law," that is the righteousness here used as what is right according to the outward obedience of the law, "blameless." Blameless! What a record! What a record Paul has! Who can beat that record?

Paul must be very proud of his achievements. Very proud of his righteousness. No, he is not. He is ashamed of his righteousness. Listen to what he goes on to say. "But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung," manure, "that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith."

So, this is obviously, by Paul's own testimony, because this is also Paul writing in Ephesians 6, the righteousness he has in mind here. There is no way he could protect himself by his own righteousness. "That righteousness," he says, "is like manure. It's unworthy. It's unrighteousness. The best of my best is as filthy rags before God. But it's Jesus's righteousness which is my protection. It's Jesus's righteousness which gives me

strength.” And so, Paul can say as it were with the hymn writer, “I build my hope on nothing less than Jesus’s blood and righteousness.”

And that means of course, you know that very well, that Paul had to lose his own righteousness. That he had to lose, as a child of the first Adam, all of the fig leaves with which he tried to cover himself before God. You know how that happened of course on the way to Damascus. God began that exposure, began to show him who He was, until he cried out, “Who art thou, Lord? What would you have me to do, Lord?” And then in those days of darkness when the scales were yet on his eyes, God is working, showing him his vanity, showing him his selfishness, showing him his pride, no doubt, showing him the core corruption, the core sin of his nature, until he loses all of his fig leaves, and all of his righteousness becomes as filthy rags, and he needs the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Oh, my friend, have you ever needed that righteousness? Are you among that happy people who have learned to become unhappy with your own righteousness and have learned to hunger and thirst after the righteousness of Jesus Christ? That righteousness which alone can stand in the presence of a holy and spotless Lord God. And you know how that righteousness is effectual. It is effectual in a two-sided manner. One aspect of it is effectual because Jesus died for sinners. He paid the price of sin. On the other side, it is effectual because he brought in the obedience that we are required to bring in. the obedience of perfect love to the law. Perfect obedience to every commandment. That we call that, for lack of better terminology, His active obedience to the law and His passive obedience in paying for sin. Even though, of course strictly speaking, He wasn’t passive in the sense that He was inactive in that He paid for sin. He was passive in the sense that he didn’t retaliate, but he was actively obeying God, even while he was being passive, laying down his life.

Well, you see, it is this double obedience, active and passive, to the law and for sin that Paul lays hold of, and it is that righteousness, the righteousness of Jesus, that satisfies the justice of God on behalf of sinners. And so, what Paul is saying is, “All my righteousness is unrighteousness, and I count it but dung. But Jesus has taken over this dung. He has paid for the price of this dung, this refuse, this unspeakable garbage of my life, and He has born and paid for the price of all of my sin, and all of my garbage, and all of the junk of my own unrighteousness, and He has given me his perfect righteousness, his glorious righteousness. I build my hope on nothing less than Jesus’s blood and righteousness.

Now remember, it is these organs, the heart, the lungs, the liver, that are being covered by this breastplate of righteousness. So, in other words, what Paul is saying is, “If you want to be a strong Christian soldier, and you want to gain the victory over Satan and enemies, when it comes to the whole area of feelings and emotions in your Christian life you need

to be girded with the breastplate of Christ's righteousness. That's your protection. That's your strength. Not your righteousness. Not your conversion. Not your experiences, as important as they are. Not your feelings, as important as they are. But Christ's righteousness. That's your foundation. That's your protection. That's your strength. That alone can blunt the edge of Satan's darts when he attacks you in the area of your feelings and your experiences."

Now, every child of God has, of course, different experiences and different feelings. Sometimes, there are wonderful feelings. Sometimes, there are wonderful experiences. Some children of God have more such experiences than others. But certainly, every child of God knows some wonderful feelings, some special times of nearness to God, times when God seems so close, I say it with reverence, that it's as if you could touch Him, as if you could embrace Him. He seems so real during worship. Public worship, sometimes, perhaps you have had that too, where it seems like you are the only one in the whole church. It's like God is speaking directly to you, communing with you, comforting you, and you leave church a happy man, a happy woman, rejoicing. If someone asks you in the church, "Partner, how are you?" And you say, "Wonderful! My hope is in nothing less than Jesus's blood and righteousness."

And you see this breastplate is used to fend off the darts of Satan, but also to fill you with wonderful feelings in the inmost organs of your soul. "I get," you say, "if I had to depend on those feelings, and they were my foundation, they were my breastplate, I would become very vulnerable, because before long Satan would wedge his way in, and my feelings would be gone. And yes, indeed, too often in my spiritual pilgrimage, my feelings are gone. And it seems that then my hope is often gone as well. Especially when I look away from that righteousness." You see, if I don't adorn myself with the breastplate of Christ's righteousness, and I give ___ to my feelings, well, I am going to be unprotected, and I am going to be open to the enemy's assaults.

So, what Paul was saying implicitly here, is that feelings are an important part of religion. Absolutely! You can't be saved without feeling. You can't love the lord without feeling. Can you be married and have a good relationship with your wife without feeling? It's ridiculous! And these people who put all of this stress on the objective dimension of salvation and say, "It doesn't matter whether you have feeling or not." They're being unrealistic. Of course, it matters if a Christian has feeling, and emotions, and love, and sorrow for sin. True religion, involves the whole person. It involves the intellect. It involves the will. And it involves feelings and emotions. So, if you have been saved by God's truth, you know what it is to be moved by that truth.

But you see, the problem here is that what Satan tries to do, is he tries to get us to exaggerate our feelings. He tries to get us to live by our feelings. Now, we are in a different territory, aren't we? We enter into a dangerous territory, because as soon as we

begin to live by our feelings, and not by the righteousness of Christ, then as soon as those feelings waver, our relationship with God goes down. Take it in the natural life as well. No matter how much you love your spouse, your intensity of your love has its ups and downs. There are times that you know in your mind that you love her dearly, or you love him dearly, but the love feeling at that particular moment is not that overwhelmingly strong. Perhaps you go for several hours without even thinking about your spouse, but you don't say, do you, after two or three hours of not thinking about your spouse, "Oh no, I don't even love my spouse! I haven't thought about her for two hours. Maybe I don't love her at all. Maybe it's all not true. Maybe I'm not truly married to her from the heart, or I really don't have any relationship with her whatsoever." You wouldn't say that!

But you see, that's exactly what Satan wants you to do. As soon as you feel some distance from the Lord, he comes, and he says, "You're a Christian? You had more feeling! You don't feel like you did when you had that experience ten years ago, five years ago, two years ago. It's probably not true with you. It's probably all your imagination." So, he plays with your feelings. And when you give him bait, when you start leaning on your feelings, you play into his trap. And before you know it, you say, don't you, "Ah, yes, you're right Satan." I mean, you don't dialogue that directly with him, but in your mind, those fears that he plants there, you say, "It's true! I'm not feeling as I should be feeling! Maybe it is all nothing."

But of course, that is Satan. And the problem with the believer at that point is that he is allowing the introspective look into his heart to become the foundation rather than the response of gratitude to his salvation. If you get hold of that, and you understand that, you will save yourself many a day of darkness. My foundation does not lie in my feelings. My gratitude is expressed by my feelings, but my foundation lies wholly and solely for one hundred percent in the bloody righteousness of Jesus, the breastplate of his righteousness.

Now, if you don't learn to distinguish those things, sooner or later, you will get into trouble. And you will say, with another hymnist, "Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?" And you will be prone to despair. You will be! But what does the Lord do? Happily, the Holy Spirit teaches us, through sermons like this, or through other means, or through conversations of God's people, the Holy Spirit teaches us to lose those feelings as our foundation, to lose those emotions and experiences as our foundation, and to trust in Christ alone, so that we learn to go on and say with that same hymnist, "I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus's name. On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand."

So, Paul is giving us good advice. He is saying, "Put on that breastplate of righteousness." Here it is in the passive sense, having on, as if somehow it comes on us.

But in the original Greek it is in the active imperative sense, put it on. Yes, God gives it to us, but put it on. Don't go out of the house without it, you see. This breastplate you need it everywhere. You need it in the home. You need it out of the home. You need it twenty-four hours a day. Everything else is sinking sand.

So, what about feelings then? Well, yes, we have to have feelings. But feelings are the fruit that flow out of faith in Jesus's righteousness. And so what happens, is over, and over, and over, and over again, both in critical times in my life, as well as in daily mundane things, as I bring my sins to God, I must learn to lay them at the feet of Jesus and take that breastplate of righteousness, His righteousness, as my only hope and my only salvation. On this I rest. Nothing else. And as I rest on His righteousness, the love for Him begins to stir.

Thomas Watson puts it so beautifully. He says, "Faith is the master grace. It's like a big wheel, the hub of the wheel, and when faith begins to stir, it sets all the other graces a running." See, when faith begins to be active, when faith, which always looks outside of myself to Jesus, when it's active, then love is aroused, and hope is aroused, and humility, and wisdom, and all the graces of salvation.

So, you don't say, "I won't believe until I have feeling. If only I am feeling, then I could believe." Then, you see, you are putting the cart before the house. But you say, "By the grace of God, I believe only in Christ's righteousness, and, therefore, I have feeling."

"Let God be thanked," Paul says in Romans 6:17, "though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered." Unless I'm just, you know, obedient intellectually. But Paul is saying that the believer is someone who was once a servant a servant of sin, the gospel, the Holy Spirit has used the gospel to uncover him to his own unrighteousness, and then he as believed in the righteousness of Christ.

Now, David wrote Psalm 71 in his old age. Some say they think it was in the last year of his life. We don't know that for sure, but he is old. You know the books of the Psalms were brought together. There were five books of the Psalms, five groups of Psalms that were brought together to form the one hundred fifty Psalms. And you read at the end of Psalm 72, "The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended." That's the end of, I can't recall if it's in book two or book three of the Psalms. So, this Psalm is right near the end. It's probably one of the last Psalms he wrote. And in this Psalm, he takes a kind of autobiographical review of his life, doesn't he? He is thinking back to when he was a boy. He is even thinking back to when he was in his mother's womb.

And what does he say? Does he say, "Well, I have made some mistakes, but I am really quite a heroic person. I have slain my ten thousands. I have been king for forty years."

You know what strikes me about psalm 71 is that there isn't a single word about David in terms of what he accomplished. But five times, "thy righteousness." Verse 2, "thy righteousness." Verse 15, "thy righteousness. Verse 16, "I will make mention of thy righteousness, even of thine only." Here it is stressed double. Verse 19, "thy righteousness is very high." Verse 24, "my tongue shall talk of thy righteousness all the day long." My life is outside of me in Jesus Christ. I learned to put on the breastplate of His righteousness.

So, what is this? Well, my friends, it's a word that we call justification. Christ's righteousness is our justification. We are made just with God through His righteousness. That is to say, by the doing, that's the active obedience to the law, and the dying, that's the passive obedience for sin, by the doing and dying of Jesus, we have peace with God. And Paul puts that so beautifully in Romans chapter 5. He just spoke in Romans 3 and 4. Well, let me back up just a moment. This is quite important. Romans 1 and 2 and the first half of 3, he is convincing, isn't he, every Jew and every Gentile that they have all come short of the glory of God. He concludes in verse 19 that every mouth may be stopped. And then he says, verse 20, "For by the law is the knowledge of sin. No one can be justified by himself." He says in verse 23, "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." No exceptions. And he has been laboring for three chapters to prove that.

And then he explains in the rest of chapter 3 and all of chapter 4 this wonderful blessing of justification. God has set forth Jesus to be a propitiation through faith in His blood to declare His righteousness, he says in verse 25, and then goes on saying seven or eight times in the rest of that chapter that it's through faith that we are justified. We are justified by faith alone. Not by works, verse 27, "Nay, but by the law of faith." "Wherefore," verse 28, "we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."

But, my point here is this, when we have put on the breastplate of righteousness by the grace of God, and that becomes our defense against the enemy, we receive all kinds of benefits and fruits flowing out of that justification. That's what we call, of course, sanctification. They flow out of justification.

So, let me in the few minutes remaining we have, let me cover some of these with you, some from Romans 5 and some from elsewhere. The first then is in Romans 5 verse 1, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have," and here comes the fruit, "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." So, Paul doesn't say, "We one day hope to have this peace," or "we might someday achieve this peace if we should get our feelings all in order." No, I have the breastplate on. I am justified by the grace of God. So, we have peace. Now, the consciousness of that peace may vary from time to time, but we have peace. It's a present, permanent possession in terms of our status with God. The

objective reality is irrevocable. The subjective feelings, yes, they vary. But this is our blessing. We have peace with God through the doing and the dying of Jesus. That's benefit number one.

Number two. This righteousness, or this justification you could say, establishes our identity. If we're believers, you see, by grace we are justified men and women. It defines who we are. It defines our existence. Who are you as a believer? Why, you could say, "By the grace of God, I trust that I am a justified son or daughter of God, because God has given me the grace and the breastplate of Christ's righteousness. And you see, that protects me. That's my identity. I don't belong to myself. I belong to another."

So, you see, when I behave inconsistently with that identity, or when I come into trouble with my feelings, or when I forget my identity, then I am acting contrary to who I am. That's what Paul said in the next chapter, Romans 6. "Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Your identity is in Christ if you are a true believer. And that is why when temptation comes, as a believer, you ought to be able to say, and would to God we would always say it, "What business do I have even flirting with that sin, because I belong to my Savior. I have no business thinking about sin. I have no business speaking sin. I have no business acting sin, because it is contrary to my identity in Christ." Well, that's the second benefit. It helps us remember who we are, so that we have strength when temptation comes to put a sword through that temptation.

Number three. Justification, Paul says in Romans 5 verse 2, gives us access. Notice what he says. "By whom," that is by Jesus, "we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand." So, we have access. God delights in His people, you see, abundantly! It's not just that God begrudgingly gives His people Christ's righteousness and says, "There you have it. It will protect you, but I have no smile on my face when I give it to you." It's just the opposite. God delights in His people. God loves them. He's not only just and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus, but He is also the Father to believers, and He smiles on them with a kindly countenance. God doesn't just put up with His people. He accepts them, and He loves them as His children. And so, His children have access into the Father's throne room. They have access into the Father's presence.

You know, the word access in Greek has a very beautiful meaning. It's so beautiful. In Christ's simple Greek it means this, and I quote from the dictionary, "Entrance into the King's presence through the favor of another." That's what Paul says! We have entrance into the King's presence through the breastplate of righteousness, through the favor of Christ, through what Christ has done. That's our access.

We can find that in two other places also in the New Testament, both in Ephesians. Ephesians 2 verse 18, "For through Him," through Christ, "we both have access by one

Spirit to the Father.” And in Ephesians 3 verse 12, “In whom,” that is again in Christ, “we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.” And then again, Paul says that we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand. Isn’t that interesting? It doesn’t say, “whereby we crawl before God,” or “cringe before God,” but he says “stand.” The word stand here is the word for a servant before his master. So, when I am justified, when I have the breastplate of righteousness on, and I stand before God, as His willing servant, I want to serve Him. I want to do His bidding. I say, “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?” And that’s a wonderful benefit of justification also. There is stability in standing. There is steadfastness in standing. There is strength in standing. God gives that through the righteousness of Christ. That’s what made Martin Luther so bold at the great time of the Reformation, which we just commemorated. What were in his words? “I can do no otherwise. God help me. Here I stand.” You see, I can’t give way. When the believer stands before God assured only in the righteousness of Christ, and out of that righteousness willing to be His servant.

Then too, righteousness of justification points us to assess our trials properly. Look at verse 3. Having been justified by faith we glory in tribulations. Isn’t that amazing? Paul is saying, “When I have on the breastplate of righteousness and affliction comes, I don’t need to say, ‘God is whipping me as a cruel judge for my sin,’ but I say instead, ‘It is my Father in heaven who is bringing me tribulation that I might know patience, and through patience that I might learn experience, and through experience hope, and through hope I will not be made ashamed, because it is the love of God shed abroad in my heart by the Holy Spirit.’”

So, he is saying the same thing as Hebrews 12 that when the believer, who stands in the righteousness of Christ, comes under affliction, it is not the judicial hand of an angry God, but it is the paternal hand of a loving heavenly father. So that makes me look at all of my afflictions differently. And I say, “All these things are coming to me. Yes, they may correct me of my sin. Yes, they will call me to repentance, absolutely. But they’re still out of the loving hand of a heavenly father who is chastening me as a faithful shepherd chastens a wandering sheep. It’s not to destroy me. It’s to bring me back. It is well.”

Then too, there is this great benefit of course of righteousness in justification being our shield whereby we quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. You see, every day I am guilty. Every day I deserve hell. Every day my repentance needs to be repented of. Every day I come short. That’s what Luther experienced too. In fact, the devil was so real sometimes he took up his inkpot and even threw it at him and said, “Be gone Satan. And if you want to get me, you have to reach my Head. You see, my status is safe in Jesus. So, if you want to destroy me, you must destroy my Captain, my King, my Savior.”

What a strength that is! What a strength that is for all my feelings. I'm frank with you. I still struggle with these things myself. I still struggle with times where I say, "I am too unworthy, Lord. I don't love thee enough, Lord. I don't trust thee enough, Lord. I don't obey thee enough, Lord." But then I think, "But wait a minute. We are saved by grace only. The righteousness of Christ is my salvation." And then I try to focus on this that God loved me even when I didn't love Him at all. Now, I don't love Him enough, but then I didn't love Him at all, and He still loved me, and stopped me, and converted me. He loved me when I wasn't trustworthy at all, when I didn't obey Him at all. He gave His son for the ungodly, while they were yet sinners. Surely, now, even though I still come short on every hand, but surely now, when I do love him, surely now, when I do desire to know Him better and to love Him better to trust Him better, He is not going to desert me.

You see, this is the way true justification through the breastplate of righteousness that I fend off all of these feelings that are to drive me into the quicksand of unbelief and despair. And then to justification by faith alone, or righteousness of Christ, is really the cutting edge of our evangelistic message. You're in a plane somewhere with someone, and they want to know what the gospel is, you have to go to this doctrine, the just for the unjust. You want to go to a man who is steeped in sin, and you want to say, "What good news do I have for you? Well, I have this good news. There is justification, there is righteousness possible through another." That's really true evangelism.

And finally, seventhly, one of the fruits of justification, or righteousness of Christ, is that it is the only way to die peacefully. I have experienced that first hand my friends. January, nearly two years, expecting to die laying on that floor in Latvia. It was only the bloody righteousness of Christ that was so vivid in my mind. It was only that by which I could die. Nothing I had ever done, nothing I had ever said even entered the picture. It was only the blood of Christ. And on that foundation, I could let family, I say it with reverence, but I could let family, and church, and seminary, and everything go, because I was safe in that blood.

And that's what Paul says here too in verse 2. We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God through that righteousness. When John Brown of Haddington came to die, you know what the very last words were that he said, just before he died? "My Christ." That's everything. To be owned by Him. "My Christ." He died with that. And you know what David Gibson said when he came to die, a great Scottish divine, who wrote that excellent commentary on the Psalms, when someone asked him was he ready to die, he said this, "I have taken all of my bad deeds, and I have put them on one heap, and I have taken all of my good deeds as well, and I have put them on this same heap, and I have run away from the heap into the arms of Jesus. And so, I may die in peace."

My Christ. My blood. My righteousness. Stand therefore, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. Amen.