

*“Stand firm, then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place...” - Ephesians 6:14*

### **“The Breastplate of Righteousness”**

Zechariah 3:1-7; Ephesians 6:14c

#### I. The Bible speaks of righteousness in several ways:

1) Self righteousness (Luke 5:31-32; 18:9-14)

2) The righteousness Jesus earned for us and credits to our account when we believe in Him (Zechariah 3:3-5; Romans 3:21-24)

3) The righteousness of living a holy life, which forms *“the breastplate of righteousness”* (Zechariah 3:6-7; Ephesians 6:14c)

#### II. How we are to keep the *“breastplate of righteousness”* in place:

1) Live a pure, holy life which includes:

a) Putting to death sinful thoughts and actions (Romans 6:11-13, 8:13; Colossians 3:5)

b) Replacing them with righteous, pure thoughts and actions (Matthew 12:43-45; Philippians 4:8)

2) Guard against the devil’s schemes which include:

a) Presenting sin as a pleasure we are missing out on (Gen. 3:1-7; Luke 4:1-13)

b) Accusing us, even when we are covered by Christ (Zechariah 3:1)

c) Tempting us to trust in works instead of grace (Luke 18:20-21)

**“The Breastplate of Righteousness”**  
Ephesians 6:14c

This morning we read from the Old Testament prophecy of Zechariah, chapter 3:1-10:

*<sup>1</sup> Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. <sup>2</sup> The LORD said to Satan, “The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?”*

*<sup>3</sup> Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. <sup>4</sup> The angel said to those who were standing before him, “Take off his filthy clothes.” Then he said to Joshua, “See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.”*

*<sup>5</sup> Then I said, “Put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by.*

*<sup>6</sup> The angel of the LORD gave this charge to Joshua: <sup>7</sup>“This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.*

*<sup>8</sup> “‘Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch. <sup>9</sup> See, the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes[] on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it,’ says the LORD Almighty, ‘and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.*

*<sup>10</sup> “‘In that day each of you will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and fig tree,’ declares the LORD Almighty.”*

Our text, as we continue our study of spiritual warfare, is taken from the last part of Ephesians 6:14: *“Stand firm, then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place.”*

Congregation in our Lord Jesus Christ,

When the first gulf war, Operation Desert Storm, began in 1991, our nation relied on the accuracy of the Patriot missile system to keep the Iraqi “Scud” missiles from our forces... How the tactics of war have changed since the first century when Paul wrote to the Ephesians!

In Ephesians 6 we see a battle displayed for us that is far greater than any human war. As we heard the quote from Abraham Kuyper last week, “the most fierce battle fought on

earth would seem like mere child's play by comparison" to the spiritual battle we are engaged in.

When I was a child I remember my parents had an illustrated, two volume set on World War 2. It was graphic. Although I don't remember all the scenes, I remember many, including the vivid pictorial display of the landing at Normandy and the plume of smoke from the nuclear bomb at Hiroshima. Those of you who fought in World War 2, or any of the other more recent wars, know the intensity and danger of war firsthand.

In the wars we fight on earth there are exemptions. Some people opt out with the exemption of being a conscientious objector. Others are not enlisted in the wars our nation fights for health reasons. But no exemptions are given for the great spiritual warfare that we find ourselves caught up in.

Furthermore, if we were to try to fight the devil and his schemes on our own power we would be dead on arrival. We would not last a moment. But as we have seen in our study of Ephesians 6 we fight in the strength the Lord provides. Ephesians 6:10: *"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power."* And we fight with the protection - the armor - that He provides. Ephesians 6:11: *"Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes."*

The armor of God includes the belt of truth, which we looked at last week, and the armor of God includes the breastplate of righteousness, spoken about in the third part of Ephesians 6:14: *"Stand firm, then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place..."*

### **Self Righteousness**

The Bible speaks of righteousness in several different ways. One type of righteousness is self righteousness. In Luke 18 Jesus gives us an example of self righteousness as He records the prayers of a Pharisee and a tax collector, ("Publican" in the KJV). The Pharisee took great pride in his perceived self righteousness, even praying, *"God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."*

That self righteous Pharisee thought he had earned his way into heaven, but Jesus pointed out that it was the tax collector who pleaded, *"God have mercy on me a sinner,"* who went home justified before God.

Why did Jesus speak so often about self righteousness and the error of the Pharisees? He did so because He knew self righteousness would be a magnet for proud human hearts, not just in the first century with the Pharisees, but in every era of time, including ours. Looking around us we see where the evil one has snared so many with thoughts about their relationship with the Lord, all based not on the righteousness of Christ, but on self righteousness.

Dr. John Gerstner, who was RC Sproul's professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary years ago, points out that there is a hymn entitled, "*Lord, We Are Able.*" Gerstner says: "That was written by Peter. - Peter said, 'Lord, I am able.' But when he was tempted by Satan and fell, Peter discovered he was not able. So he revised that hymn to read: 'Lord, We Are Not Able.' - He learned that only when he was united to Jesus Christ could he stand his ground and be victorious." (As told by James Montgomery Boice, Commentary on Ephesians, pp. 241, 242).

Clearly, self righteousness will never serve as a breastplate of protection against the evil's schemes.

### **The Righteousness of Christ**

The Bible, while warning us against self righteousness, also describes for us the righteousness of Jesus Christ. This righteousness flows from what theologians call the active and passive obedience of Christ. In His active obedience Jesus kept every commandment to perfection, not only actively keeping His Father's commands outwardly, but also inwardly in His motives and thoughts. That active obedience of Christ is credited - imputed - to every true believer.

In His passive obedience Jesus submitted to the agony of the cross. As He Himself pointed out, when Peter cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest, "*Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?*" (Matthew 26:53-54). By obediently submitting to death on the cross Jesus passively shed His blood, which covers the sins of all who truly believe in Him.

We receive the righteousness of Christ by faith in Him, and are thus described as being "clothed in the righteousness of Christ." Sometimes this is described as "alien righteousness," meaning it is not our righteousness, it is not of our doing, but it is the righteousness of another, the righteousness of Jesus Christ which is imputed - credited - to us.

Being clothed in the righteousness of Christ is portrayed beautifully for us in the passage we read from Zechariah 3: "*Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. <sup>4</sup> The angel said to those who were standing before him, 'Take off his filthy clothes.'*"

*Then he said to Joshua, 'See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.'*"

<sup>5</sup> *Then I said, 'Put a clean turban on his head.' So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by.'*"

The righteousness of Christ is portrayed as a garment throughout Scripture. We see that already in the Garden of Eden. After Adam and Eve sinned, and realized their nakedness

before God, they tried to cover themselves with fig leaves. Their effort was foolish and futile, but God, in grace, provided clothing for them from animal skins.

The first garment came at the cost of life. The shedding of blood was necessary to cloth Adam and Eve, and that shedding of blood - and those garments made from the slain animal - were pointing ahead to Jesus Christ, to His shed blood, and to the garment of righteousness that we are clothed in when we believe in Him. As Romans 3:21 points out: *“This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”*

### **The Righteousness of Living a Holy Life**

A third type of righteousness is the righteousness of living a holy life out of gratitude for the righteousness of Christ which we have by faith. It is this third type of righteousness which forms *“the breastplate of righteousness”* which we are told to arm ourselves with. Zechariah also writes about this in Zechariah 3:6-7: *“The angel of the LORD gave this charge to Joshua: “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.’”*

It is this righteousness, walking in God’s ways and striving to keep His requirements even though we cannot do so perfectly, which forms the “breastplate of righteousness.”

As we study the armor of God we see where each piece of armor is crucial. It’s not enough to wear the belt of truth but not the breastplate of righteousness. The two were connected in a Roman soldier’s armor, and the two are connected in our spiritual armor as well.

Not too long ago I inquired about a colleague of mine in a former denomination for whom I had great respect. I couldn’t track him down and called another colleague to ask about him. “Oh, I’m sorry, didn’t you hear? He had to demit the ministry.” There is forgiveness... Sins are washed away... But the consequences of dropping your guard, of not keeping the breastplate of righteous living in place, brings destruction and sorrow into innumerable lives. Sin always has a ripple effect. Your sin, when you drop the breastplate of righteousness, won’t just affect you. It will affect your loved ones, your church family, your community. There is always a ripple effect with every wave of sin.

In the heat of Roman battle once the breastplate was gone the soldier’s heart was exposed to the arrows of the enemy. In the Christian life the same is true. If you drop your guard, if you lay down the breastplate of living a Christian life, for even a moment, the evil one will aim one of those flaming arrows, his temptations to sin, deep into the depth of your heart.

Young people, how many times do you have to experiment with crack cocaine or crystal meth before you are hooked? For many, it is one time. 85% of the people who try crystal

meth one time become totally addicted. Drop the breastplate of righteousness one time, and your life can be contorted and agonized permanently.

How many teenage girls, visiting the crises pregnancy center, have said through their tears, “I didn’t think I’d get pregnant after just one time.” How many older, seasoned, mature Christians, like my former colleague, have seen their lives spiral into the deepest of heart aches, for so many, because “one time” they put down the breastplate of righteousness?

You see, every part of the armor is crucial. There are no optional pieces. Congregation, you can’t say, “I like the belt of truth but I’ll pass on the breastplate of righteousness.” No, as verse 11 says, *“Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.”*

And incidentally, the confessions of having sinned “one time” are almost always rooted in repetitive sin. The “one time” leads to another and another and another until an habitual pattern of sin has developed.

Seeing, then, the importance of the breastplate of righteousness how can you and I know that we have put on that breastplate? And if, by God’s grace, we have put on the breastplate of righteousness, how can we keep that “breastplate” in place?

### **Living a Pure, Holy Life**

First, live a pure, holy life, which includes putting to death sinful thoughts & actions. Romans 6:11-13: *“In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.”* Colossians 3:5 adds: *“Put to death, therefore whatever belongs to your sinful nature....”*

It is crucial that we put to death sinful practices and habits because habits are like cables. Have you noticed how a steel cable, or even a thick rope, is made of many strands? Each one of those strands on a cable is like a habit, the more strands the stronger the cable.

The story is told about the man who trained snakes for a large traveling circus. There was one snake that he became especially fond of. It was a young boa constrictor that would gently wrap itself around the man’s shoulders. In the man’s eyes, the snake was beautiful. After feeding the snake he would allow it to wrap itself around him; after all, the snake was young and not fully developed. But because it was an everyday routine, a daily habit of feeding the snake and then spending time with it, the trainer didn’t realize just how large that boa constrictor had grown until it squeezed him to death.

b) However, it's not enough just to put sinful habits and thoughts to death, which is done, incidentally, by the Spirit's enabling power. - Romans 8:13, *"If you live according to the sinful nature you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body you will live."* And we put to death those *"misdeeds of the body"* as we replace sinful habits with godly, righteous habits.

Just as every poison has an antidote, so every sin has a counterpart of righteousness that must be exercised. A man who is allergic to bee stings not only has to remove the stinger from his flesh; he also needs to take the antidote. Spiritually speaking it's the same way. It's not enough to say, "Well, I no longer swear like I used to." You must also ask, "Am I now using my voice to praise God? Am I using my voice to tell others about Him?"

It's not enough to say, "I'm starting to squelch some of those thoughts of lust, greed and pride." You must replace those thoughts with the guidance of a passage like Philippians 4:8: *"..Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, - think about such things."*

Do you remember what Jesus talks about in Matthew 12:43-45? *"When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation."*

### **Guarding Against the Devil's Schemes**

In addition to living that pure, holy life, guard yourself against the devil's schemes, which include: (a) Presenting sin as a pleasure we are missing out on. No one likes to miss out on pleasure. And Satan, knowing our human nature and frailness, presents evil as a pleasure everyone else enjoys but we are missing out on.

I have never been good at wrapping presents; in fact, my attempts have been the source of many family jokes. But if Satan were a human being he would excel at gift wrapping. Why? Because he can take the most pathetic, sad, empty sin and package it to look delightful and fun. He then dangles his gift-wrapped sin before the Christian and says, "Put down your breastplate, lay down your guard of godly living. Look at the pleasure you are missing out on!"

At other times he takes what is good, and tempts us to misuse the good things God has given us. He did that with Eve. He did that with Jesus, and with virtually everyone else in between. And he still specializes in taking what is good and tempting us to trust in the gift instead of the Giver.

As Satan dangles his pleasures before us he appeals to our emotions and to our thoughts. The breastplate for a Roman soldier covered both his heart and also his lower abdomen, his stomach. Jewish readers understood that symbolism well. In Jewish literature, including the Bible, the thoughts come not just from our mind, but rather they originate in the heart, the center of who we are as people. Jesus Himself warned *that “out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony...”* (Matthew 15:19)

In a similar way, in the old King James Version of 1611, we read passages such as Genesis 43:30, *“And Joseph made haste; for his bowels did yearn upon his brother,”* - and we might wonder, “What is that verse talking about!”

Or we read in 1 John 3:17 *“He shutteth up his bowels of compassion.”* And again, we wonder, *“Just what is the Scripture talking about?”* It’s talking about emotion. In Jewish thought the emotions come from the stomach. Several commentators point out that the breastplate of righteous is crucial because it guards our emotions and our thought life, both of which are very powerful forces within in us. And what does Satan work on, when he dangles his gift-wrapped temptations before our eyes? He works on our emotions and on our thoughts.

b) Another scheme of the evil one is to accuse us of our sin, even when we are covered by the blood of Jesus. The name “Satan” literally means “Accuser.” He specializes in finding those times when our breastplate of righteous living has not been securely attached, and he accuses. He does to us what Zechariah describes him doing to Joshua the high priest.

Although he has been cast out of heaven and cannot accuse us before God, he excels at accusing us of our sin, both of commission and omission. “You aren’t a child of God, not with those thoughts, not with what you did. God could never love you knowing how evil you are...”

We’ve all been accused, haven’t we? And when that happens don’t try to use self righteousness as a breastplate and say, “Yes, but I did this or that which was good.” Instead point to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, to His shed blood on the cross, and say, “That is my real righteousness, that imputed, credited righteousness of my Savior, Jesus Christ!”

Some of you have heard about Martin Luther’s dream. The devil was accusing him of a long list of sins, all recorded on a scroll, and to Luther’s conscious stricken heart he realized every accusation was true. He was terrified in his dream until he recalled the words of 1 John 2:1 *“We have One who speaks to the Father in our defense, Jesus Christ the Righteous One.”*

Then he said to the devil, in his dream, “I committed all those sins and so many more, but they are all covered by the precious blood of Jesus Christ... And *“I have One who speaks to the Father in my defense, Jesus Christ the Righteous One.”*

c) A third scheme of Satan is to tempt you to trust your own works instead of God's grace. When the rich young ruler was confronted with the commands of God he said, "*All these I have kept since I was a boy.*" (Luke 18:21).

Many people today have bought the lie of the devil that their own righteousness will bring them to heaven. They are singing the song that John Gerstner said Peter must have initially wrote, *Jesus, I Am Able*. But unlike Peter, who was convicted of his sin, they have not turned to Christ in true repentance and saving faith for His imputed righteousness.

We are to strive always to live a righteous holy life out of gratitude for the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ credited to our account. But even as we strive to live holy righteous lives we realize the truth of Isaiah 64:6 that "*all our righteous deeds are like a filthy rag in God's sight.*"

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Military tactics have certainly changed since the first century. We have unmanned drones, stealth bombers, patriot missiles, and other sophisticated weaponry to take on the enemy. The tactics of nations at war has changed.

But the devil's tactics haven't changed that much. He doesn't need to change his tactics because they have been so very effective against professing Christians who drop their guard; who don't keep that "breastplate of righteousness" - the breastplate of living a pure, godly life - in place.

May you and I, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, always keep the breastplate of righteousness in place. Living, by God's enabling grace and power, holy, pure lives so that we can stand against the devil's schemes in the armor and the strength that God provides. Amen.