

September 5, 2021: Pentecost 15 – Ephesians 6:10-20

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Brothers and sisters in Christ.

Happy Labor Day weekend! On this holiday we take time to appreciate the labor of all workers in America. Whatever job you might have, it comes with its own equipment. I've had several jobs over the years. As a restaurant server, I needed my non-slip shoes, my apron, an order book, and plenty of pens. Now that I work in a factory, I'm required to wear steel-toed boots and protective eyewear. Perhaps your job involves computers and or specialized tools for construction or health care. Whatever job you have to do, you want to make sure that you are properly equipped.

All of us here share a vocation as Christians. Being a believer doesn't require special garments or tools, but we still need to be equipped. What do we need to be a Christian? In our rapidly changing world, do we have what it takes to continue to be a follower of Christ, especially when the world is becoming more and more anti-Christian? As we consider what it means to fulfill our Christian duty, God shows us that we are fully equipped to carry out this vocation.

If you asked a person on the street what a Christian should be, they might say that we should be loving, kind, and generous. They might expect us to help solve the world's problems. And honestly, that's what some believers think we are supposed to do. We think our duty is to be the best people out there. We can quickly get wrapped up in service projects, helping out the poor and the sick. Then, there's the growing demand for social justice. People want us to make a difference for the sake of humanity.

But this doesn't line up with God's priorities for us. People who focus solely on these earthly causes are much like the Pharisees of Jesus' day. The Pharisees were upset with Jesus' disciples because they were eating with unclean hands. According to their tradition, Jews needed to give their hands a ceremonial washing before they ate. They also had to clean their dishes properly before each meal. The Pharisees questioned how Jesus could be a true teacher if his disciples didn't follow the traditions of the law. But Jesus showed them that the issue was with their hearts. The Pharisees were merely observing external laws; they didn't have true dedication to God. We get caught up in the externals too. And while creating positive change in the world is worthwhile, what God truly cares about is what comes out of our hearts.

The devil loves distracting us from what God wants. Earlier in Ephesians, Paul notes how we are naturally apart from God. In chapter 2:12 Paul says,

“Remember that you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.” Satan sees our natural state, and he is delighted. If we are far from God, we are right where the devil wants us. And while most of us would claim that he is our enemy, by nature we cooperate with Satan's efforts. He knows exactly what weapons to use to strike us, yet we don't feel as if we're under attack. We are drawn to the luring traps of Satan. We begin to feel comfortable in our favorite, secret sins. The tempter's schemes constantly pull us further and further away from God, and our hearts are not pleasing to God.

Paul makes it very clear that the primary issue in this world is not the *consequences* of sin, but the *father* of sin. He says, “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.” Later on, he says, “When the day of evil comes.” **When**, not *if*. These dark forces are very real and very threatening.

Paul's wording highlights the reality of this danger. The simple word “the” pops up throughout the original Greek and English to show that these dark forces are definite. Talk of a spiritual battle might seem unreal or irrelevant compared to contemporary issues. But God wants us to know this as a fact. The spiritual forces of evil working *are* against us. The day of evil is *now* - the present evil age that we live in. If we ignore this, we continue to play into the devil's hands. By prioritizing problems in society, we lose focus on what God's will is for us as Christians.

When we stand by ourselves on the battlefield, we are defenseless. We think our good intentions and charitable natures will protect us. But we have no power to stop the devil, no armor or strength. And Satan is relentless in his assault. Paul describes the devil's attack as an onslaught of flaming arrows. Satan longs to pierce us, to burn us, and to drag us down with him to eternal anguish and unending death in hell. He will empty his quiver day after day if it means he can tear us away from God. If we should happen to fall, it's not because we live in a troubled world or we stumbled upon a bit of bad luck. It's because the evil one - the greatest threat - constantly seeks to add trouble to our lives and to lead us into desperation and death.

Maybe you already thought it was challenging to be a child of God before I started. Maybe all this talk of the real evil threat has you feeling pretty hopeless right now. Don't give up hope. There is wonderful news for us as believers. The title we bear – Christian – points to our only source of hope: Christ. Because of our blessed connection with our Savior Jesus, we *are* fully equipped to stand in the face of attack and to pray boldly.

Throughout the book of Ephesians, Paul lays out the special bond that Christians have with Christ. In this section, Paul shows that the only one we can rely upon is our God. He begins, “Be strong in the Lord and in **his** mighty power. Put on the full armor of God.” In verse 17, “Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of **God.**” “Pray in the Spirit.” We have a triune God who is all-powerful and all-present, standing with us in the battle. Without him, we would surely fall. But with his power, we are equipped to stand firm.

It can be challenging to believe that God is with us in the battle, because we don't see him in this world. But Paul reminds us, this battle does not take place on earth. Those spiritual forces that we fight against - the devil and his demons - are in the heavenly realms, the spiritual plain. We know someone much stronger who also resides in the heavenly realms. Ephesians shows that Jesus was elevated to the heavenly realms, and all things were put under his feet. He rules over every force for the good of his people, those who are connected to him. While we reside on this earth, we may not see God. But our connection with Christ through faith means that we have all the blessings of being with God. It's as if we are already there in those heavenly realms with Jesus.

Allow me to make another grammar point if you will. Notice that Paul says “buckled” or “in place” or “fitted.” All of these words show up in the *past* tense. In the Greek text, even the phrase “take up” is past tense. This means it all happened once in the past. We don't need to create our own armor. For God says, “You are mine in Christ. Therefore, you **have been** equipped with my armor. You are **already** fitted. You *have* buckled your belt, you *have* fitted your feet, you *have* taken up the shield and the helmet and the sword. They are in your hands – right now.”

And it's not as if we have been equipped because we have to win the battle. We certainly still fight. But that war in the heavenly realms between the evil forces and our Savior? The ultimate victory is already won. Remember who we are connected to. Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, came into this world and went to battle for us. Because we were separate from God, Jesus took on our sins, becoming our sin. He was willing to be forsaken by God for us. And when his suffering was complete, he cried out, “It is finished.” Jesus went down to the devil's realm to declare that victory for us. Even though the devil still attacks us in this world, we know the end result of this spiritual battle. Because of Christ's work, we are protected from whatever Satan throws at us.

And so, we have an abundance of spiritual blessings through our connection with Jesus. We know the *truth* of our salvation, which is the belt which holds us up. We are clothed with Christ's righteousness as our own. We can stand ready for whatever we might face in the world because we have immeasurable peace in the gospel of our Lord. Through the strength of our faith in God, we can deflect all

of Satan's temptations. Through the mighty Word of God, the message of salvation enters our hard hearts. As Jesus lives in us, we live in him and experience the richness of his gifts for us. Isaiah sums it up well: “‘No weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the *heritage* of the servants of the Lord, and this is their vindication from me,’ declares the Lord.” None of Satan's attacks will succeed, because we have inherited the full armor of God.

Paul highlights another gift we have as Christians. Because we are united with Jesus, we have the freedom to speak to him openly and confidently, to pray to him. As we stand firm in Christ, we recognize that he is coming soon. But while we wait, life isn't always easy. We do endure hardships. We struggle through illness. We stress, and we worry, and our hearts grieve. We long to be with the Lord. But the gift of prayer equips us for the battle. In prayer, we recall God's promises given to us. We ask our God for his strength in this present evil age. We give thanks for the rich blessings that God provides for body and soul. We pray not only for ourselves but for all the believers. We pray for those who proclaim this gospel message. Satan hates when his defeat is broadcast in the world, and so he strives to prevent its preaching. But God's Word will never fail. So, we pray that the gospel may continue to reach all those who need to hear it. We pray for pastors and teachers to boldly go out and share the good news. And we stand in confidence, knowing that God is with us and equips us with everything we need.

I don't know what equipment you need for work every day, or if you're always prepared for every challenge you may face. But I can confidently say that you are fully equipped as Christians. As children of God, you are connected with the victorious Christ. Because he has defeated the greatest threat, we know that we can stand firm. And as we stand in this world, we bear witness to our Savior God.

In our OT lesson, Moses prophesied that the Israelites would stand as a testimony to the nations around them. People would consider Israel great because the true God was on their side. As the world sees us clad in the armor of God, it will cry out, just as Deuteronomy says, “Surely this great nation” - that is, the community of believers - “is a wise and understanding people.” We truly are the people of God, the people that he has equipped for battle. We are God's people who stand firm now and one day soon will stand in the presence of our victorious Savior. Amen.