

THAT STAMP OF APPROVAL
34th in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"
Ephesians 6:13-14

I used to play hockey, often with guys from our church. One challenge of hockey is you skate on a hard surface that at some point you were certain to land on, and it is surrounded by boards that you are sure to slam into. You are on a rink with 11 other guys all of whom are carrying and using long sticks, and the object of the game is a hard rubber puck with a hardness similar to a baseball. In other words, in the course of the game you are likely to get hit with sticks in your legs, arms, back and possibly even head. You also are likely at some point to get smacked by a flying puck. So you wear a lot of equipment to protect yourself. Leg pads, shoulder pads, elbow pads, helmet, gloves. The problem with hockey is it is expensive, and we never really had money for expensive hobbies. I didn't have the best equipment and I tried to make what I had last longer than I should have. I remember one time I had some leg pads that weren't the best to begin with, and to make matters worse they were almost worn out. The elastic straps that held them on my leg were kind of stretched out. So one game another player and I kind of collided, and the collision caused the pad to shift around on my leg so it wasn't situated as intended. Before I could fix it a member of the opposing team fired a hard shot toward the net, only I was in the way. The puck hit me on the inside of my knee, right where some padding should have been, but the pad had moved out of the way. So that hard puck hit right on the bone on the inside of my knee. The pain knocked me down. I managed to get up and sort of limp off the rink. That thing was sore for two weeks. Having good equipment: priceless.

We are in a battle. God doesn't send us into battle without the equipment we need to protect ourselves. He has given us armor, kind of like the protective hockey gear I used to wear. But there is a big difference. The armor God gives us is the best equipment one could ever have. It is what we need. Today we will begin looking at some of the equipment God provides us with to enable us to fight the war before us. Let's look at Ephesians 6:13-14. We've seen the past couple of weeks that we are in a battle. We've learned how our enemy tries to attack us. Now we are going to learn about how to defend ourselves against those attacks.

STAND FAST

The theme of this part of Ephesians is that we are in a spiritual battle. This war is being fought continually, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with no let up. It will be raging as long as we are alive. There is never a moment in our lives when we are not being affected by it in some way. But what does it mean to fight this battle, and since we are up against an enemy who is stronger than we and smarter than we, since we cannot even see this enemy, how are we supposed to fight?

There are people who will tell you that you need to identify demons. You have to name them. You need to know that demons can control different geographical areas, so you need to know who you are fighting against. Then you need to bind these evil forces. I read one supposed expert who claimed there are four levels at which demons can attack us and then specified the way we should

fight those demons at each level. My problem with these ideas is their source. They don't come from God's word. So where do these people get them? They make them up! This passage is the clearest in the Bible about spiritual war. Do you see any mention of any of those ideas in it? No, and you won't find most of those ideas anywhere in the Bible.

The talk about spiritual war in some quarters gets pretty wild. Another supposed expert claimed that some demons aren't all that bad and went on to say that if you can learn a demon's name you can defeat it and "once defeated demons will often work for you." Um, right, and the moon really is made of green cheese. You can also buy a device called the Qu Wave Defender, that is guaranteed to protect against mind control as well as psychic and spiritual attack. It claims to use "scalar waves and solfeggio energies" to protect the user. I have no idea what that's supposed to mean. If you are gullible enough to buy that I'd like to gauge your interest in buying a bridge that goes over the bay from downtown to Coronado. I'd like to sell it to you.

Fighting the spiritual battle is not about casting demons out of people and "binding" them. Pay attention to these verses. They specifically and clearly tell us what it means to fight the spiritual war and how to do it. God gives us the instruction and training we need to be good soldiers in this war. We don't need to listen to some squirrely ideas some humans have come up with to tickle people's ears, gain a following and promote their own agenda. People are always curiously drawn to the spooky and the creepy, so they are prone to listen to those who are selling spooky ideas about demons and spirits. We need to not fall for that. We just need to do what God tells us to do. Otherwise, we actually set ourselves up to become casualties of the spiritual war. Remember, our enemy is very clever and will do anything he can to divert you from doing what God wants you to do because it is what will produce his life in you.

Just read verses 13-14 and see if anything sticks out to you. "Therefore put on the full armor 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. Stand firm then." The word "stand" is used 3 times. Combine this with the fact Paul had just said in verse 11, "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes," and you should get the message that the most significant thing we can do in the spiritual battle is to stand firm. It is to not crumble in the face of the onslaught from the enemy.

A few years ago I read an account from another pastor of something that happened to him when he went out for the high school football team as a freshman. One day at practice they were running the first team offense and they needed the equivalent of human tackling dummies to serve as defense against the offense. Somehow it was decided to put this future pastor on the defense as a 125 pound outside linebacker. The offense ran a sweep to his side. Coming around the end of the line was the team's all league 200-pound senior running back. The little freshman knew it was his job to stop that play even though he was grossly overmatched. He stood his ground. That big running back slammed into him like a freight train going full speed. To the poor scrawny freshman, it felt like his whole world exploded. All he knew was that he was slammed to the

ground with a violence that took his breath away. The back hit him so hard that it slammed his helmet down so it got jammed inside the edges of his shoulder pads. Teammates had to help him pop his helmet back out. But somehow, he didn't even know how, in the midst of the chaos of that hit he had managed to grab a leg of that runaway freight train and against all odds had tripped him and brought him down. That one act of courage earned him a spot on the football team.

So you're saying our job is to get run over by the enemy like that poor kid was run over by that big running back? No, our job is to stand our ground like he did. As intimidating as it was for that little freshman to face that oncoming monster running back, it can be even more intimidating for us to stand our ground against our spiritual enemy. The Christians in Ephesus faced a spiritual battle that was played out in the form of sometimes intimidating opposition, outright rejection, and even hardship in the form of loss of relationships and even financial difficulties. The pressure on them was unrelenting, and it would have been very tempting for them just to cave in.

The book of Hebrews was written to Jewish believers in Jesus who faced intense opposition, like the Christians in Ephesus. Those early Hebrew believers were struggling. Some were wavering, thinking that maybe they ought to give up on following Jesus. In Hebrews 10:32-36 the author of Hebrews said, "Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured a great conflict of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere, so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised."

They were publicly insulted and persecuted. They had property unfairly taken away from them just because they were followers of Jesus. Some were put in prison. It was hard. They needed to stand their ground and not give up. Paul was telling the Ephesians they needed to do the same thing. They needed to see that all the opposition was Satan trying to ruin their faith, and they needed to resist him.

They did not need to name demons, or bind them, or have visions of foul, fierce demons wielding swords or do any of the outlandish things some Christians tell us to do. They were to see that the hardships battering them were attacks by the enemy, attacks aimed at causing them to crumble under the pressure, to quit believing in Jesus. They needed to recognize what was going on and stand firm in the face of it.

James 4:7 says, "resist the devil and he will flee from you." The term translated "resist" is the same word that is translated "stand your ground" in Ephesians 6:13. The way we resist the devil is don't cave in when he attacks.

The message that we need to stand our ground in the face of the enemy's attacks is often repeated in the Bible. In Luke 21:12-17 Jesus talked about the difficulties that his followers would face in

the future. He said of the world, “they will seize you and persecute you.” In verse 17 he said, “Everyone will hate you because of me.” But in verse 19 he said, “Stand firm, and you will win life.” The way to win life is to stand your ground. In 1 Corinthians 16:13 Paul said, “Be on your guard, stand firm in the faith; be courageous, be strong.” In Philippians 4:1 Paul said to another church that was dealing with opposition, “Stand firm in the Lord in this way.”

But no one is taking away our property, putting us in prison, taking away our jobs because we are Jesus followers, at least not yet. So what does it mean for us to stand firm? Remember what the enemy is trying to do. He is trying to get you to serve yourself and to stop trusting God. He wants more than anything to tear you away from God. So remember how he will attack. He will assail you with doubt, firing questions about the truthfulness of God, and battering you with inexplicable hardships and losses. He will flood you with opposition and even rejection from people.

Have you ever gone through a period of life where there was a sudden onslaught of painful ordeals, or where you’ve had a series of hardships that just come one after another? Have you ever gone through a time where it seems like you are the living personification of Murphy’s Law, if anything can go wrong, it will? Has it ever felt to you like somehow life has turned against you? When that happens you need to recognize what is going on. You are under attack. The enemy is trying to get you to do what he could not get Job to do. He wants you to curse God, to give up on him, to tell him you don’t trust him and don’t want any more to do with him.

Have you ever had those times where everything just seemed bleak? Maybe you can’t even put a name on why you are feeling so down. You try to figure out what is causing it, but there doesn’t seem to be any particular trigger. The enemy is at work. Maybe he is highlighting your weaknesses and failings, pointing out what a poor excuse for a follower of Christ you are, assuring you that there is no way a holy God could ever truly love you. Maybe he is persuading you that you are a total failure and that everything you do you screw up. That’s the enemy trying to bury you, trying to get you to give up.

In the case of many of the early Christians Satan was going for the big win. He wanted them to give up altogether and quit following Jesus at all because it was just too hard. He would love to get a shutout like that with us as well, but he would settle for something a bit less dramatic, but just as effective. He would like to get you to the place where maybe you don’t abandon your faith altogether, but you just kind of go through the motions. He wants you to believe that life is better if you pursue other things and kind of keep that Jesus stuff as an addendum to your life. Yeah, you believe, but what you really care about is success, money, comfort, acceptance from other people.

I love the book of Ephesians, and I think of the church in Ephesus as a thriving community of serious followers of Jesus. In Ephesians 1:15-16 Paul had said he had not stopped giving thanks for them after hearing about their faith in the Lord and their love for all God’s people. What a great bunch of believers they must have been. Do you know what happened to them? Just a couple of decades after Paul wrote to them John would quote Jesus in Revelation 2:4-5 saying to these

same people, “Yet I hold this against you; you have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen!” They still believed. They were still faithful, mostly. But their love had grown cold. They were probably doing many of the right things, but there was no passion in their faith. Satan had eroded their stand.

But how can we stand firm against the onslaught of the enemy? The end of verse 13 at first seems a little puzzling. Paul refers to being able to “stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” That sounds odd. Stand your ground so that after you have done everything you can stand. It sounds like Paul is repeating himself. However, we have to connect the first part of the verse to that last part, and when we do it makes more sense. Paul says “Put on the full armor of God that you may be able to stand, and after you have done everything then stand.” The everything we are supposed to do is put on all the pieces of the armor of God. Put it on so you can stand, and then once you’ve put it on, do, in fact, stand firm.

You’ve probably heard a preacher somewhere talking all about what each piece of armor does and how it ties with Paul’s description of it. The breastplate of righteousness guards your heart, and so on. That’s not the point. Paul is just listing pieces of armor that everyone back then was familiar with and saying, “Use all of it. Put on every piece.” And the pieces he wanted us to use are things like truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the Word of God.

BUCKLE UP WITH TRUTH

You have to start with truth. Yes, I know, our culture insists there is no such thing as truth. But no one really lives as though that is actually the case. It is not possible to live with no truth. If we really believed there is no truth, there would certainly be no schools. What could they teach if there is no truth? There would be no laws. If there is no right and wrong how can anything be against the law? There would be no courts. There would be no way really for us to talk about anything.

Alan Segel, a professor of religion at Columbia University, said, “When somebody claims to know the truth, and claims to be able to tell it to you, the first thing you should do is check to see if you still have your watch, because that’s the prelude to getting taken.” One well known journal recently declared that we live in a “post truth world.” This is why there is a flood of fake news. If there is no such thing as truth, then isn’t all news fake? There’s no difference between fake news and some other kind.

You simply will not do the hard things necessary to live by your beliefs unless you know they are true. ***There is no way for us to stand against the schemes of the enemy unless there is truth to stand on!***

There are a couple of major problems with not having truth upon which you can stand. About four years ago Laurie and I had the joy of going on a vacation with our kids and their spouses. We were in Hawaii when a hurricane swung by north of the islands. It was far enough away that the only

effect it had on the weather was it blocked the trade winds and it became pretty hot and muggy. But it also sent some very large surf our way. One day toward the end of the day Michael, Toby and I went for a swim in the ocean. There were some sizable waves crashing on the beach, and we had a great time just diving through and body surfing the waves. But one of those waves caught me off guard and just hammered me. It knocked me down and put me in the tumble cycle like I was in a washing machine. I was completely disoriented and was being controlled by the wave. I started to get a bit concerned because I was running a bit short on breath after a while, but I was so scrambled I didn't know which way was up. Then came some good news. I hit bottom. I knew where the bottom was at that point, so I just had to go up from there. I needed a solid reference point to find my way up out of the water, and the bottom provided it.

Life, at times, is going to do a number on us somewhat like that wave did on me. In fact, the enemy will purposely try to disorient you with bewildering circumstances, confusing ideas, to put you in a place where you don't know which way is up. In such times it is essential that you have that reference point by which you can get oriented and find your way out. You need solid truth that you can count on, a rock on which you can base your life.

In Psalm 40:12 David bemoaned his situation and said, "Troubles without number surround me." Life was so tumultuous for him that he couldn't even count all the troubles he was dealing with. There were just too many of them. But in verse 2 he said of the Lord, "He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire, he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand." That's what we need in this often confusing, tumultuous world. We need a firm place to stand. The truth gives us that firm place; it enables us to actually stand which the storm is raging.

Truth enables us to do the hard things. If there is no truth, no ultimate absolutes, what is left? There is just me. There is just doing whatever you think you have to in order to take care of you. There is no motivation for sacrifice whatsoever, unless the sacrifice directly benefits you. There is no hill worth dying for. In the end that means there's nothing worth living for either.

What truth can we count on? In John 14:6 Jesus made the outlandish claim, "I am the way, the truth and the life." He said he is the truth. The enemy will, as we have seen, assail us with doubts. That's when we need to go back to what we know to be true. I know without doubt that a man named Jesus lived 2000 years ago. I am confident of the fact that he was executed by the Roman authorities, but that as hard as it may be to believe, he came back to life. There is convincing evidence that Jesus actually conquered death. This is really the most reasonable explanation of events. By doing that he confirmed what he had claimed, that he was God living among us in human form. This being true, I can trust what he taught. I can know that God is real, that he loves us enough to go to inconceivable lengths to rescue us, and that in Christ there is hope. I know that there is truth I can follow for my life. These things form a bedrock on which I can stand. They are a foundation for life, and it is a foundation I need never question.

STRAP ON RIGHTEOUSNESS

Next Paul tells us to put on the breastplate of righteousness. This means that righteousness is a crucial part of our protective gear. But why is righteousness important? How does it help us in the spiritual war?

Righteousness is considered by the majority of people in our culture to be irrelevant. They are as interested in gaining righteousness as they are in getting new vacuum tubes for their TV. Which is to say not at all. Don't need vacuum tubes for TV's these days, and don't need righteousness either. They don't think they care at all about righteousness. And they are totally wrong. I'm going to tell you 3 important things about righteousness.

Every human, without exception, desperately longs for righteousness.

That seems like an outlandish statement, but I guarantee you that it is true, even though many of us don't know we long for righteousness. That's because we don't understand what righteousness is. To be righteous is to be declared right. It means to be approved. How much do humans want to gain that stamp of approval? We want it about as much as we want air to breathe. If you don't believe me, find someone whose lifestyle you believe to be unhealthy or wrong, and communicate to them your opinion. Watch what happens. Will they, "Thank you for telling me that. I really appreciate your concern for me?" Absolutely not. Oh, well then they'll likely say, "Okay. You have your opinion and I have mine. Whatever," right? No, the most common reaction will be that they will be offended. How dare you judge me? What happened there? They heard you saying that you don't approve of what they do, and they can't bear that. It makes them angry. That's because saying they are not approved feels like an attack on the core of their being. And that's because at the very heart of human beings is a desperate need for approval. In other words, a desperate need for righteousness.

I felt bad for Laurie because she once told an extended family member that the individual was making some foolish decisions. The person took great offense, and it impacted their relationship for some time. This person accused Laurie of being judgmental. What Laurie said was absolutely true. She didn't accuse the individual of being a bad person or of being worthless. She just said some decisions the person had made were demonstrably bad. The person should have just been able to say, "Well, I think you're wrong" if they disagreed. But the need for righteousness was too powerful for that. To be disapproved in this person's mind was unbearable. It was an unforgiveable offense.

Business people get the stamp of approval by leading or building a large, profitable business. Academicians get the stamp of approval by earning doctoral degrees and publishing their books. Athletes get the stamp of approval by excelling in their sport. Performers get the stamp of approval by having huge crowds come to their concerts and cheer them. Civil war re-enactors get the stamp of approval by having authentic looking uniforms and equipment. This is why peer pressure is so powerful. The group can control individuals, make them be and do things that are not in their own best interest, just because it is required to get the stamp of approval. In other words, what drives peer pressure is righteousness!

It's not too hard to see how the enemy might have used this against the Ephesian Christians. Many of their former colleagues and friends would have disapproved of their new faith in Jesus. In some cases, even family members likely disapproved. Wanting to be "righteous," to be approved, would have exerted a strong pull on them to back off of their faith in Jesus. Increasingly believers in our country are experiencing that same pull.

The righteousness we need is before God.

This is another truth that people don't believe. Something inside of us continually tells us the stamp of approval we seek comes from other people. The weirdest thing is we often are driven by the need for approval and we can't even identify which people we actually think can give it. It's just "them," "those people out there."

We all have been given some stamp of approval that we sought deeply from some people at some point in life. Has it ever been enough? Have you ever gotten so much approval that you never need to seek any more again? I can tell you from personal experience that the answer is no.

In seminary we had to take two semesters of a class they called Sermon Prep. It was really speech class for pastors. The prof I had, who was really good, one day told the class that I was the best he'd ever had at making biblical truth come alive. Wow. Approval. It felt really good. At my seminary every year they chose a few seniors they felt were the best preachers to have the honor of speaking in chapel. I was one of those chosen. Wow. Approval. It felt really good. At the end of the year they gave an award to the senior the faculty deemed to have been the best of that group. They gave the award to another student. I thought, "Huh. I'm not the best. Wonder what I needed to do better." It didn't feel awful. But it didn't feel great either. There was a bigger issue to come. After I graduated I became a pastor. Nobody cared what my professor said or whether I was one of the chosen students. Now in a sense I was being judged every Sunday by a new crop of people. And you could tell how approved I was by the fact that masses of people weren't flocking to hear me speak. They still aren't, come to think of it.

This is where the spiritual war comes into play. The enemy uses our need for righteousness against us. He tells us continually that what we need is the approval and acclaim and acceptance of other people. Since he has sway in the cultures of this world, he creates peer pressure that rivets our attention firmly on the stuff of this world and draws us away from God. He wants us to distort our souls to gain notice and acclaim from others, to be ever pursuing that mirage of approval out there that we will never reach. He wants us to become exhausted, disillusioned and embittered by the futile pursuit. He wants us to never listen to what God says about it.

It should tell us something when the approval we get in this world is never enough. It should tell us that the approval we long for must come from somewhere else. It is revolutionary when we realize that the righteousness we need does not come from people or from anything in this world. It comes from God. It makes sense if you think about it. Let's suppose that you are a writer. Like

me, you've written a novel. And let's suppose that your spouse thinks it's great. And 30 of your friends and family have read it and they all enjoy your book too. That feels really good, doesn't it? But is that enough for you? Probably not. You wish you had approval from a higher court. Now let's suppose that somehow someone from the *New York Times*, reads your book, loves it, and writes a rave review of it. Within weeks your book is near the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. How does that feel? I have no idea. But I'm thinking it would feel good. You'd feel approved as a writer. You got that stamp of approval from the highest court you can think of. What about when it comes to whether you are approved as a person? It feels good to be approved by your spouse and your friends. But somehow, it's not enough. You still want more. In fact, you will be left with a nagging sense that there is a higher court whose approval you need. That's because you need ultimate approval from the highest court. You were created with that need inside you. It will never go away. And that highest court is God. No human will ever be at peace until he or she has God's stamp of approval, until they are declared righteous by God.

The righteousness we need is by grace through faith in Christ.

Amazingly our enemy can even use our need for righteousness from God against us. He has firmly planted in our minds an idea that we struggle to ever get away from. How do you get a stamp of approval? You earn it! That's how it is everywhere in the world. Every moment of your life you have lived with that thought embedded in the deepest part of you. And the enemy uses that to just destroy us. Because the problem is, we don't earn it God's approval! We can't. We don't even approve of ourselves much of the time. If I can't be righteous in my own eyes, how could I ever expect to be righteous in God's eyes?

So the enemy hammers away at us. You don't measure up. You are not approved. You are not righteous, and you never will be. The reason Jesus Christ came to this world is that not one human being will ever be able to become pure and good enough to earn God's approval. Romans 3:10 says, "As it is written, there is no one righteous, not even one."

Amazingly God made a way to declare us righteous, approved. It is not by us performing, by working harder to finally be good enough. Rather he said he had a whole new system. Instead of the performance system he set up the faith system. In Galatians 2:16 Paul wrote (in the English Standard Version), "We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus so that we may be justified by faith in Christ."

What Paul meant by "works of the law" essentially is the performance system. The word translated justified here is important. According to one of the best dictionaries of ancient Greek, as used here it meant, "to be pronounced and treated as righteous." In other words, it means we are given God's stamp of approval. He declares us righteous, simply because we put our faith in Christ.

In Philippians 3:9 Paul, who formerly was the world's leading proponent of the performance system, said he now was thrilled to be "found in him (Christ), not having a righteousness of my

own that comes from the law (performance), but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.”

When we were in Hawaii I noticed again something I have seen before there, something that is different from here. Here all the restaurants are inspected by health departments and given grades. Of course everyone here is naturally going to always look for the placard in the window that displays an A grade. In Hawaii they also inspect the restaurants. But they don’t grade them. There it is a pass or fail system. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen an establishment proudly displaying a “Fail” placard in their window. But I’ve seen the “Pass” sign many times. We think God uses the grading system. I think I’m getting a C, which isn’t great, but it’s better than that guy. I’m sure he’s getting a D or an F. But hear this clearly. The only system God uses is a pass/fail system. If you put your faith in Jesus you get a pass. If you don’t, you fail. End of story.

Paul tells us to put on this righteousness in Christ. When we do, it defends against all the enemy’s attacks on our worthiness and on our desperate need for approval, for righteousness. All of his accusations are deflected, not because we’re better than most people, but because in Christ we have passed. We have been declared righteous. When we start feeling the enemy telling us we need the approval of people and we need to work harder to get it, we put on the breastplate of righteousness and affirm, “I have been declared approved by the highest court in the universe. There is no higher or more important stamp of approval than the one I have been given. So I have all I need.”

CONCLUSION

You know the truth. You know that Jesus Christ is Lord. This is the truth that is the foundation for everything in life.

You are righteous in Christ. Remember the system is pass/fail. By putting your faith in Christ you have passed. You have been declared approved by God. It is final approval, and it is from the highest court in existence. Rest in that approval.

Knowing the truth, resting in righteousness, stand your ground!