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PROTECTED BY TRUTH AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

Ephesians 6:14

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Ephesians Lesson 57

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The late philosophy professor, Allan Bloom, began his best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind* [Simon and Schuster, 1987], stating (p. 25),

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question $2+2=4$. These are things you don't think about.

He goes on to point out that although these students may be varied in backgrounds and religious beliefs, they are unified in their allegiance to relativism and equality. The danger they fear from those who hold to absolute truth is not error, but intolerance. And tolerance is the supreme virtue that our educational system has inculcated for many decades. Bloom says (p. 26), "The point is not to correct the mistakes [of the past] and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all."

Bloom was not a Christian. He could not be labeled a "fundamentalist." He was a Jewish philosopher at a secular university who was pointing out the absurdity of intellectual relativism. It effectively shuts down rational discourse, education, and all attempts to improve society by resolving problems. But it is firmly entrenched in our educational system and in our society at large.

If we throw out the idea of absolute truth, we are also discarding absolute standards of morality. Mark Helprin, a novelist and contributing editor to *The Wall Street Journal*, observed the absurd fervency with which university professors and students hold to relativism. He was speaking at a university town in Massachusetts. Before he knew it, he found himself debating his entire audience on the subjects of human sacrifice and cannibalism. It was not that these well-educated people were in favor of sacrificing children

to the gods, as the ancient Mayan and Aztec cultures did. They weren't advocating the cannibalism of the South Sea islanders from 150 years ago. Rather, Helprin said (in *Imprimis*, July, 2002), "to take the position that human sacrifice and cannibalism are wrong is not only to reject relativism but to place oneself decisively in the ranks of Western Civilization ... and this they would not do."

Many college students cannot bring themselves to say that the Holocaust was evil (see Bloom, p. 67). One student said (in *Reader's Digest* [Feb., 1998], p. 75), "Of course I dislike the Nazis, but who is to say they are morally wrong?" While these students deplore what Hitler did, they express their disapproval as a matter of personal preference, not as a moral judgment.

I wish that our cultural tolerance of sin and rejection of moral absolutes were only outside the church. But a study by George Barna in the early 1990's showed that while only 28 percent of the general population expressed strong belief in absolute truth, among those who identified themselves as born-again evangelicals, the number dropped to 23 percent! (Cited by James Dobson, newsletter, Dec., 1991.) I saw this personally when I spoke recently at the city's Diversity Awareness meeting. At least two young women identified themselves as Christians, but proceeded to say that we should not be judgmental by calling homosexuality sin. Rather, we should "love" these people and accept their behavior.

When the apostle Paul tells us how to stand firm against these evil spiritual forces, he lists six pieces of spiritual armor to put on: the belt of truth; the breastplate of righteousness; the sandals of the preparation of the gospel of peace; the shield of faith; the helmet of salvation; and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:14-17). Today we will examine the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness, which stand firmly opposed to the philosophical and moral relativism of our day. Paul is saying,

To stand firm against the enemy, gird yourself with the belt of truth and put on the breastplate of righteousness.

1. To stand firm against the enemy, gird yourself with the belt of truth.

For the Roman soldier, the girdle or belt was a leather apron-like piece that extended down to the thighs, protecting the lower

abdomen and genital areas. The soldier tucked his robe or tunic into it so that he could move quickly and without encumbrance in the battle. The loins were often a metaphor for strength. Girding oneself has the idea of displaying power and courage (Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 473, note 140). The main idea of a soldier girding his loins was that he was ready for vigorous action. Paul's point in telling us to gird our loins with truth is that we cannot be ready to fight the enemy if we are not strong and ready with God's truth.

Commentators line up on both sides of the question of whether *truth* here refers to God's truth as revealed in His Word or the truthfulness and integrity of the believer. I believe that it refers to both and it is not necessary to separate them. As I have said, the armor is a metaphor for Jesus Christ. He is the truth and He is our righteousness. If we put on Christ as the truth, then surely we will live as truthful people. If we put on Christ as our righteousness, it is inconceivable that we would live in sin (Rom. 13:14; 2 Cor. 6:7).

As you know, the Book of Ephesians is structured on the idea that the objective truth of our position in Christ is the foundation for practical righteousness. Chapters 1-3 set forth what God did for us when He saved us and placed us in Christ. Chapters 4-6 then spell out how we must live in light of these truths. We see this in how the word *truth* itself is used in Ephesians.

1:13, "the message of truth, that is the gospel of your salvation..."

4:15: "speaking the truth in love..."

4:21: "just as truth is in Jesus..."

4:24: "put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth..."

4:25: "Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor..."

5:9: "(for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth)"

The foundation for truth is the gospel, which centers in Jesus who is the embodiment of truth. As a result of our being new creatures in Jesus Christ through the gospel, we are to be truthful people. So putting on the belt of truth involves being ready for battle against the enemy by girding ourselves with the truth of the

gospel and by being truthful people. But first, we need to answer the question:

A. What is truth?

Pilate asked Jesus this question, I think with a sneer in his voice. Jesus had said to him (John 18:37), "For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." Jesus' assertion shows that there is an identifiable body of knowledge that may be labeled "the truth," and that Jesus Himself testified to it. While philosophers and theologians write volumes on the subject, I can only comment briefly.

(1) God is the truth.

Webster (1828 Dictionary, cited by Del Tackett, "The Truth Project" [Focus on the Family], Lesson 1), defines truth as "conformity to fact or reality...." Something is true if it is "conformable to an essential reality" (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* [Merriam Webster], p. 1267). Thus *truth* does not refer to our subjective perceptions of reality, but to what "*really exists* external to ourselves" (Tackett). Since God is the only essential reality in the universe, He is truth and the standard for all truth. Jesus referred to Him as "the only true God" (John 17:3). If He is the only eternal, self-existent Being, then He is the truth, the only unchanging reality in the universe. He cannot lie (Titus 1:2).

(2) Truth is stable, firm, and reliable.

The Hebrew word was often used of things that had proved to be reliable. Thus it often refers to God's faithfulness to His covenant promises. As the God of truth, we can put full confidence in His word (A. C. Thiselton, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [Zondervan], ed. by Colin Brown, 3:877). In the New Testament, Paul often uses *truth* to refer to the gospel message itself, which is reliable and must be trusted (*ibid.*, pp. 884, 887; see Eph. 1:13). For both Paul and Jesus, the truth often refers to correspondence between word and deed (*ibid.*, pp. 883, 886). John, who uses the words for *truth* in more than half of the New Testament occurrences, uses it "regularly in the sense of reality in contrast to falsehood or mere appearance" (*ibid.*, p. 889).

(3) Jesus Christ is the embodiment of God's truth.

John 1:14 states of Jesus, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." Jesus said (John 14:6), "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." As we have seen, Jesus claimed that His reason for coming to this earth was to testify to the truth (John 18:37). He claimed to speak the truth (John 8:45, 46). He prayed (John 17:3), "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." So if we want to know the truth, we must come to know God through the One who was the embodiment of truth, Jesus Christ.

(4) God's Word is His revelation of truth.

Jesus prayed (John 17:17), "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." Paul referred to the Bible and its central message, the gospel, as "the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). Therefore, any deviation from God's Word is error or falsehood. Clearly, God communicated the truth of His word in written, propositional statements that may be understood. The emerging church movement rejects this and opts for a story-telling approach to the Bible. But in the process they make many false propositional statements about the propositional statements in the Bible (see D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* [Zondervan])! Long before the emerging church latched onto postmodernism, Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote (*The Christian Soldier* [Baker, 1977], pp. 200-201),

The truth can be defined, it can be stated in propositions. That is what we find in these Epistles. It teaches clearly that you must therefore say that any other teaching is wrong and you must condemn it. The New Testament argues; the New Testament is polemical. The Apostle Paul uses very strong language. He says that some people 'believe a lie', that there are 'false teachers', and he warns people to flee from them.

(5) God and His Word of truth are absolutely true in every culture and in every age.

While certain things in the Bible are clearly culturally related (e.g., "Greet one another with a holy kiss," Rom. 16:16), the moral commandments of the Bible stem from God's unchanging holy nature. They are true for every culture in every age. The gospel

consists of truth about who we are in God's sight—sinners that have rebelled against Him. It consists of truth about who Jesus is—the sinless Son of God who took on human flesh through the virgin birth, who lived a sinless life, and who died on the cross to pay the price that we as sinners deserved. The gospel declares that God offers forgiveness for all sins and eternal life to any sinner that repents of his sin and believes in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

That simple but profound message of the gospel has transformed the lives of both primitive, illiterate cannibals and of highly educated university professors. We must hold firmly to the idea of God and His Word as absolutely true in every culture and in every age. As Gordon Clark wrote (*A Christian Philosophy of Education*, cited by John MacArthur, *Reckless Faith* [Crossway Books], p. 44), "Since God is truth, a contempt for truth is equally a contempt for God." But we must explore a second question:

B. How do we put on the belt of truth so that we can stand firm against the enemy?

As I already stated, the belt of truth refers both to the objective truth that God has revealed in His Word and to the truthfulness that must characterize us as believers. Thus,

(1) To stand firm against the enemy, gird yourself with the core truths of the gospel.

Paul writes (2 Cor. 4:4), "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." If people get saved, it is because God opened their blind eyes. He shines "in their hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). To put on the belt of truth, you must have been born again by God's word of truth (James 1:18). You can say with the man born blind whom Jesus healed (John 9:25), "one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

While sincere believers differ over non-essential teachings, on the core truths of the gospel, we must agree or we are not Christians in a biblical sense of the word. In this context of spiritual warfare, it is important to note that demons have false doctrines that they promote (1 Tim. 4:1). Satan and the demons deceive unbelievers in many ways, but especially with regard to the gospel (2 Thess.

2:9-12). If the enemy assails you with doubts, go back to the bedrock of the gospel: Who is Jesus Christ? Are His claims true? Did He die for my sins according to the Scriptures? Was He raised from the dead as the many New Testament witnesses testify? Have I experienced the change from blindness to sight?

Our Christian walk depends on putting on the new man, created in righteousness and holiness of the truth (4:21-24). The truest thing about you is not what you feel. It is not what others say or think about you. The truest thing about you is what God says is true. To stand firm against the enemy, gird yourself with the glorious truths that Paul sets forth in Ephesians!

- (2) To stand firm against the enemy, gird yourself with truthful behavior.

In light of the truth of the new man (Eph. 4:21-24), Paul applies it by commanding (4:25), "Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another." If we are not walking openly before God and truthfully with one another, the enemy has an opening to attack us. If we practice lying and deception, not only do we erode trust, which is at the heart of close relationships. We also join forces with Satan, who is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). So to stand firm against the enemy, we must gird ourselves in daily experience with the belt of truth: the truth of the gospel and truthful behavior.

2. To stand firm against the enemy, put on the breastplate of righteousness.

Again, commentators debate whether this refers to the imputed righteousness of Christ that we receive at salvation, or to the necessity of a righteous life. I argue that it is both. Paul uses *righteousness* in 4:24 to refer to the new man that God has created when He saved us. He uses it in 5:9 to refer to righteous behavior, which includes all goodness and truth. So it is both.

The breastplate covered the soldier from his neck to his waist, front and back. Thus it protected his heart and other vital organs. In Hebrew thought, the heart represented the mind and will, and the bowels were the seat of the emotions. Thus the breastplate of righteousness protects the believer's mind, will, and emotions, areas where Satan often attacks. As Proverbs 4:23 states, "Watch over

your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life." Put on the breastplate of righteousness!

A. What is righteousness?

"Righteousness is that attribute by which God's nature is seen to be the eternally perfect standard of what is right" (D. W. Diehl, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Walter Elwell [Baker], p. 953). For us, to be righteous is to be without guilt or moral culpability before God. It also means to conform to God's standard of holiness, to His moral commandments. It is to be pure, just as Jesus is pure (1 John 3:3). It involves not just our outward behavior, but also being pure in our thoughts and attitudes (Matt. 5:27-28; Mark 7:20-23; Ps. 51:6, 10, 16-17).

B. How do we put on the breastplate of righteousness so that we can stand firm against the enemy?

- (1) To stand firm against the enemy, put on the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Some argue that since we were justified (declared righteous) once and for all at the moment of salvation, Paul could not be referring to imputed righteousness here. Thus it must refer to practical righteousness only. But that is faulty reasoning.

Paul made the astounding statement (2 Cor. 5:21) that God made Christ, "who knew no sin, to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." He wrote (Rom. 4:5), "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness." (See also, Rom. 3:21-26; Phil. 3:9). The glorious truth is that we stand before God clothed with the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. That is our only hope for eternal life.

But Satan comes and gets us to focus on our sinful behavior. "Look at how you just exploded in anger! Look at how you lied to cover your tracks! Look at how you lusted after that girl! Some Christian you are!" How do you answer him if his charges are true?

You answer by applying Christ's imputed righteousness: "You are right, Satan, I did just sin. But my eternal life does not depend on my sinless behavior or perfect track record. I am trusting in the blood of Jesus Christ and His righteousness credited to my ac-

count. Take it up with Him!" (See Zech. 3:1-5; Rev. 12:10-11). You put on the breastplate of the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ as your defense against Satan's accusations.

- (2) To stand firm against the enemy, put on the practical righteousness of an obedient life.

As Paul has explained (Eph. 4:24), the new man was "created in righteousness and holiness of the truth." Thus as new creatures in Christ, we are to "walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth)" (5:8b-9). In other words, as we walk as God's children in this world, as new creatures in Christ, we will be growing in conformity to God's holy standards as revealed in His Word. Fruit takes time, but there should be evident progress in holiness and obedience. If there is a gap between our profession of Christ and our practice, the enemy will use it to attack us.

Conclusion

Peter Singer, who has been called the most influential philosopher alive, teaches ethics at Princeton. He is credited with starting the animal rights movement. For him, the notion of same-sex marriage is intellectual child's play. It has already been logically decided and it's time to move on to polyamory. Singer argues that any kind of fully consensual sex between two or 200 people is ethically fine (*World* [Nov. 27, 2004], p. 32). Bestiality is "not wrong inherently in a moral sense." It is not wrong, says Singer, for parents to give birth to a child so that they intentionally can kill him and transplant his organs in an older child! And, it would be ethically okay to kill one-year-olds with physical or mental disabilities (*ibid.*, p. 33)! This man teaches *ethics* at the university where Jonathan Edwards was once President!

How do we stand against this sort of blatant attack on the morality of the Bible? How do we guard ourselves from falling into the moral relativism and tolerance of our degraded culture? Gird yourself with the belt of God's absolute, unchanging truth. Put on the breastplate of imputed and practical righteousness. They will protect you as you stand firm against the enemy of our souls.

Application Questions

1. How can we know which parts of the Bible are culturally limited and which parts are true for every culture? For example, what about women's roles in the home?
2. How should we interact with a person who believes that all "truth" is relative? Where do you start?
3. A skeptic says, "God commanded His people to kill their enemies and to stone adulterers and homosexuals. Is that absolutely true?" How would you answer?
4. Since we will never be perfect in this life, in what sense can we "put on the breastplate" of practical righteousness? Can't Satan always bring an accusation against our imperfect behavior?

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