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BOOTS FOR THE BATTLE

Ephesians 6:15

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Ephesians Lesson 58

Boots for the Battle Ephesians 6:15

Last week, Marla and I hiked the beautiful West Fork trail down in Oak Creek Canyon. It is spectacular with the fall red, orange, and yellow maple trees. When you get about three miles in, the trail comes to a place where there are cliffs on both sides of the creek. You can't go any farther unless you wade in the stream. I had left my sandals in the car, so I tried taking off my hiking boots and walking barefoot in the stream. The combination of the freezing water and the rocks on the bottom prevented me from going more than a few excruciatingly painful steps. Marla had brought her sandals and would have been able to go much farther.

Proper footwear can make a huge difference, whether you're hiking or playing a sport or fighting in a war. In Paul's day, soldiers did not have land mines. Instead, they put sharpened spikes just beneath the surface of the ground, camouflaged with leaves or soft dirt around them. An advancing soldier needed sturdy boots to stop the spikes from penetrating or he would suffer a debilitating injury. He could be outfitted in the most invincible armor from his head down to his ankles, but it wouldn't do him a bit of good if he couldn't walk. When your feet hurt badly, you can't even stand up, much less fight or march. So it was essential for soldiers to wear rugged boots designed for battle.

Roman soldiers wore boots that had small nails protruding from the bottom to give them firm footing in combat. In the context here, Paul is emphasizing standing firm against the attacks of the enemy (6:11, 13, 14). Some commentators argue that the preparation to which Paul refers is the readiness to proclaim the gospel to the lost. They argue that Paul is referring to Isaiah 52:7, which refers to the feet of one preaching good news of peace.

While there is no question that every believer should be always ready to share the gospel (1 Pet. 3:15; Col. 4:5-6), the context in Ephesians 6:15 is about standing firm and defending the faith against the attacks of the enemy. The Greek word translated "preparation" can also refer to a prepared foundation or base (it is

used this way in Ps. 89:14 [88:14 in the LXX]). Paul's emphasis contextually is not evangelizing the lost, but defending the church and oneself against the attacks of Satan. He is saying,

To stand firm against the enemy, be prepared by putting on the boots of the gospel of peace.

There is deliberate irony, in that the gospel of *peace* enables us to wage *war* successfully. The gospel of peace is our firm footing in the battle against Satan. Let's see how that applies to us.

1. To be prepared with the boots of the gospel of peace, we must clearly understand the gospel so that we can defend it against attack.

There is one sense in which the gospel is easy to understand. Little children can grasp it. Illiterate primitive people can get it. In fact (as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31), it is often those who are wise in this world that scoff at the gospel, whereas God reveals it to the simple, so that no one may boast before Him.

The good news (that's what *gospel* means) is that although we all have sinned against God and deserve His eternal judgment, because of His great love and mercy He sent His own Son to bear the penalty that we deserve. We receive God's gift of salvation by faith alone, apart from any merit or good works on our part. John 3:16 is one of the simplest and most beloved verses explaining the gospel: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." Or, as Paul said to the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31), "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved...."

So, we're ready to move on to the next point, right? Well, not so fast! For one thing, while the gospel is simple on one level, on another level, it is deep and profound. It is like the ocean, where a toddler can play on its shore, but great whales cannot plumb its depths. Over the years, I have come to appreciate that preaching the gospel well is not a simple matter! Neither Jesus nor the apostles ever used a simple, formulaic method. They never used the same approach twice. And so there are ever-deepening levels for us to come to in our understanding of the gospel.

Also, Satan hates the gospel and is always attacking it from various angles. We see this repeatedly within the pages of the New

Testament, where false teachers quickly perverted the essentials of the gospel. Paul wrote Galatians to defend the gospel against those that claimed to believe it, but they added the Jewish rite of circumcision to faith as necessary for salvation. Paul rails against them in the strongest possible language (Gal. 1:6-9). Even Peter and Barnabas for a short while had compromised the gospel by currying the favor of these false teachers, until Paul confronted them (Gal. 2:11-14). The apostle John wrote much of his first epistle to warn his readers against those who were trying to deceive them (1 John 2:26). So to defend the gospel message against attack, we must be crystal clear in our understanding of it.

As you may know, John MacArthur is often viewed among evangelicals as something of a controversialist. But I have a hunch that the apostle Paul would also be viewed in that way if he were alive today. I have heard John say that he does not enjoy controversy, but he is committed to defending the truth of the gospel. I also have heard him say that at the beginning of his ministry over 40 years ago, he never expected that he would spend so much time defending the gospel from attacks by professing Christians. Yet that is what he has done. Let me share four errors that MacArthur has defended the gospel against, so that you can see how it is constantly under attack.

- A. The gospel is under attack from the radical non-lordship salvation heresy.

One of MacArthur's earliest polemic books was *The Gospel According to Jesus* [Zondervan, 1988]. He wrote it to counter the serious errors of one of my seminary professors, Zane Hodges (whose book is deceptively titled, *The Gospel Under Siege* [Redencion Viva, 1981]). Hodges also wrote, *Absolutely Free* [Zondervan, 1989]. MacArthur countered that book with, *Faith Works* [Word, 1993].

At the heart of the controversy is the nature of saving faith. Is it possible to believe in Jesus for salvation without at the same time submitting to Him as Lord? Hodges argues that if you say that a person must submit to Jesus as Lord, you are adding works to faith, thus perverting the gospel. But MacArthur correctly points out that Jesus warned of many who would claim to believe in Him, but they are not genuinely saved (Matt. 7:21-23). As James and First John clearly emphasize, saving faith necessarily leads to a life

of obedience to Christ. Those who claim to believe in Jesus but do not obey Him are deceived (1 John 3:4-10).

- B. The gospel is under attack from “Christian” psychology, which denies the sufficiency of Christ and the gospel.

MacArthur wrote *Our Sufficiency in Christ* [Word, 1991] to counter the error of “Christian” psychology and some other errors that undermine the gospel. This popular movement that has flooded into the church claims that while you must believe in Christ for salvation, in order to deal with your psychological and relational problems, you need the insights of psychology. So the gospel is nice “spiritual truth,” that is fine for your devotional life, but it doesn’t really have much to say to the real life problems that you face. To deal with these problems, you need more than Christ, more than the Holy Spirit, and more than the Bible. You need a professional therapist.

But that view assaults the transforming power of the gospel. It subtly, but surely, attacks the person and work of Christ. Did His substitutionary death and bodily resurrection end the tyranny of sin in the lives of believers or not? Is the gospel promise of new life in Christ just a nice, but useless, platitude or does it really give us a new heart, new desires, and the power to overcome sin? Does the indwelling Holy Spirit produce His fruit in us, or do we need psychotherapy to help Him out?

- C. The gospel is under attack from the “seeker church” movement.

MacArthur wrote *Ashamed of the Gospel* [Crossway Books, 1993] to show how the seeker church movement has softened the offense of the cross to make the gospel more palatable and user-friendly. The seeker movement has applied American marketing principles to the church. They have asked potential “customers,” “What would it take to get you to come to church?” The customers answered, “We’d like an upbeat, short service that relates to our felt needs. Tell us how to succeed in our families and at work. Tell us how to cope with our problems. Give us contemporary music that makes us feel good (keep it light on content!). Throw in some entertaining drama to keep the program moving. Keep the sermon

short and humorous. By all means, get rid of that hellfire and damnation stuff! That's depressing!"

So, the church marketing folks went back to the drawing board and designed a church around these felt needs. Throw in a Starbucks Coffee bar, a workout room to keep those bodies in shape, some great multi-media effects, and you've got a program that the seekers will flock to. But in the process, the gospel gets changed into some variation of, "Try Jesus, He'll help you with your problems." But that's *not* the gospel! It's really another form of idolatry, where you "use" your "Jesus idol" to get what you want out of life.

D. The gospel is under attack from the postmodern views of the emerging church.

MacArthur wrote *The Truth War* [Thomas Nelson, 2007] to counter the postmodern attack on the gospel that has come in through the emerging church movement (in it, he also hits many of the previously mentioned errors). Buying into the view that truth is relative and ultimately unknowable in any certain way, the emerging church has also attacked the atonement of Christ. It proclaims a tolerant, all-inclusive universalism that does not confront sinners with their need to repent and believe the gospel.

If I had time, I could deal with other modern attacks on the gospel. The "new perspective on Paul" undermines justification by faith alone, which is at the heart of the gospel. "Open theism" attacks God's sovereignty and omniscience. Some in the charismatic movement preach a false gospel that promises health and wealth to everyone. The Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church lure frustrated evangelicals through a message of salvation by ritualism and good works. The cults all have a works-based offer of salvation. Native religion and eastern religions promise salvation through mysticism and works. The list goes on and on!

The point is, if we are going to be prepared for battle by being shod with the gospel of peace, we need to understand the gospel clearly so that we can spot Satan's relentless, but often subtle attacks and defend the gospel against these soul-destroying errors.

2. To be prepared with the boots of the gospel of peace, we must have appropriated that message personally.

F. F. Bruce (*The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans], p. 408) wrote, "Those who must at all costs stand their ground need to have a secure footing; in the spiritual conflict, this is supplied by the gospel, appropriated and proclaimed." Note three things about appropriating the gospel:

- A. Appropriating the gospel personally begins with repentance from sin and faith in Christ alone for salvation.

In order to appropriate the good news about Jesus Christ, you must also accept the bad news about your sin. The Bible confronts and indicts us all with the plain truth (Rom. 3:23), "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Further (Rom. 6:23a), "For the wages of sin is death...." If you take sin and judgment out of the gospel in order to make the message more acceptable to modern thinking, you just took away the need for a Savior. Christ did not die to save us from poor self-esteem! He does not save us from a bad marriage to a good marriage! He does not save us from financial failure to success. Christ died to save us from sin and God's eternal judgment, which we deserve because we have sinned.

To appropriate the gospel, we must repent of sin and believe in Jesus Christ. Mark (1:15) summarizes Jesus' preaching of the gospel, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." The message is about God's being the King, the Lord over all. The required response is, "Repent!" Turn from your sins to God. Rather than running your own life, submit to the King. And, "believe the gospel." The good news is (as the angels summarize it in the announcement of Jesus' birth, Luke 2:11), "for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." God sent a Savior to rescue you from sin and judgment. You must believe in this Savior and submit to Him because He is the Lord.

So the crucial question is, "Have you repented of your sins and believed in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord? Have you trusted in His death as the payment for your sins? Have you submitted to Him as the Lord of your life?" If not, your god is the god of this world, Satan. You can't put on the boots of the gospel of peace until you've appropriated the gospel personally.

B. Appropriating the gospel personally continues with preaching the gospel often to your own soul.

Someone recently gave me a helpful little booklet by Pastor Milton Vincent, "A Gospel Primer" (self-published). He credits Jerry Bridges' book, *The Discipline of Grace* [NavPress, 1994] with challenging him to preach the gospel to himself every day. Vincent writes (p. 7), "God did not give us His gospel just so we could embrace it and be converted. Actually, He offers it to us every day as a gift that keeps on giving to us everything we need for life and godliness." He adds (p. 8), "Over the course of time, preaching the gospel to myself every day has made more of a difference in my life than any other discipline I have ever practiced." I can't give you all of the benefits that he lists, but here are three:

- (1) Preaching the gospel to your own soul increases your love for God, for others, and for the lost.

These three loves represent the two greatest commandments and the Great Commission. The gospel focuses us on God's great love for us and of the infinite price that He paid to redeem us from our sins. Paul exults (Eph. 2:4-5), "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)." Meditating often on what God did for us in the gospel will fill our hearts with love for Him.

The gospel also increases our love for others. Many verses could be cited, but note Ephesians 5:1-2, "Therefore be imitators of God as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us...."

And, the gospel increases our love for those who need to know Christ. After Paul goes through the gospel in Romans 3-8, reaching the crescendo of God's unfailing love that enables us to endure all trials (Rom. 8:35-39), Paul's next words tell of his great sorrow and unceasing grief because his fellow Jews are not, for the most part, saved (Rom. 9:1-3). Rehearsing the gospel to your own soul burdens you with the condition of those who need to hear about Jesus Christ.

- (2) Preaching the gospel to your own soul humbles your pride.

Pride is at the root of every sin. Pride leads me to think that I know better than God does what is good for me. Pride leads me to be selfish and disregard the feelings of others. Pastor Vincent writes (p. 32), "Nothing suffocates my pride more than daily reminders regarding the glory of my God, the gravity of my sins, and the crucifixion of God's own Son in my place." That is Paul's point after explaining that the gospel is totally from God, who chose us in spite of our foolishness and weakness (in 1 Cor. 1:26-28), "so that no man may boast before God" (1 Cor. 1:29).

- (3) Preaching the gospel to your own soul causes you to glorify God in all things, including your trials.

As we saw in Ephesians 1, the fact that God chose us before the foundation of the world and saved us through Christ's blood is all "to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Eph. 1:6; see also, 1:12, 1:14). Also, as Paul shows repeatedly, reveling in the gospel of God's grace towards us while we were yet sinners causes us to rejoice even in our trials, knowing that He is using them to conform us to the image of His Son (Rom. 5:1-8; 8:28-39).

Far more could be said, but the point is: appropriate the gospel personally by preaching it to your own soul often.

- C. Appropriating the gospel personally brings the peace of Christ practically into your daily life.

Paul tells us to stand firm by putting on the boots of "the gospel of *peace*." We saw in Ephesians 2 the two-fold peace which the gospel brings to us.

First, it brings us *peace with God*. Formerly, we were alienated from God because of our sins, separate from Christ, "having no hope and without God in the world" (2:12). But as Paul goes on to say, the cross of Christ preached peace to us and reconciled us to God, so that now we have access to Him. You cannot fight the evil one unless you have God's peace in your heart because you are reconciled to Him through the blood of Christ.

Second, the gospel brings us *peace with one another*. As Ephesians 2 shows, Christ Himself is our peace (2:14). He brought together into one the formerly hostile Jews and Gentiles, reconciling "them both in one body to God through the cross" (2:16). The battle against Satan is not just individual; it also is corporate. He is

trying to destroy the church and one way he does it is by creating division and strife over personality clashes or over non-essential doctrinal fights.

Be alert to Satan's schemes here! He often gets a church fighting over non-essentials. Then some in the church react to the sinful fighting by saying, "We shouldn't fight at all!" So the church ends up tolerating those who promote destructive heresies regarding the gospel. Paul has emphasized the need for tolerance with one another on the non-essentials (4:1-3). But he also has warned about the dangers of destructive false doctrines (4:13-16). We should be at peace with all that love the true gospel. We are at war with those that pervert the gospel.

Conclusion

C. H. Spurgeon wrote (*The New Park Street Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 5:41),

The Church of Christ is continually presented under the figure of an army; yet its Captain is the Prince of Peace; its object is the establishment of peace, and its soldiers are men of a peaceful disposition. The spirit of war is at the extremely opposite point to the spirit of the gospel. Yet nevertheless, the church on earth has, and until the second advent must be, the church militant, the church armed, the church warring, the church conquering. And how is this? It is in the very order of things that so it must be. Truth could not be truth in this world if it were not a warring thing, and we should at once suspect that it were not true if error were friends with it. The spotless purity of truth must always be at war with the blackness of heresy and lies.

Do you have your boots on? Without them you are not prepared to stand firm against the enemy of the gospel. Be prepared with the boots of the gospel of peace by understanding the gospel message so that you can defend it against error. appropriate the gospel of peace personally and preach it often to your own soul, as well as to those who are lost. In so doing, you will enjoy God's peace in your soul.

Application Questions

1. How can we know when an error is serious enough to fight against or when just to ignore it?
2. Which of the errors on the gospel have you most frequently encountered? How should you respond to people espousing these errors?
3. If someone claims that to insist on submitting to Jesus as Lord is “works salvation,” how would you refute this?
4. Is it wrong to use felt needs as the appeal to come to Christ? For example, “He will give you a happy marriage.” Cite biblical examples.

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