

Wellness

Ephesians 6:10-18

This is the last of eight messages in the series, *Affluenza and Other Ailments*. I have worked so hard on these messages that I am worn out; so I've recruited some assistants to help me begin this final message.

These are four of our grandchildren: Zoe, Ezekiel, Josiah, and Joel; and our foster grandson, Kaleb.

They are helping me to illustrate **wellness**, which is the theme of today's message.

"Wellness" is a current buzzword for health care professionals. Our medical caregivers want us to *stay* well and not get sick. With this aim, they encourage us to make *healthy lifestyle choices*, to establish *ongoing practices* that build resistance against illness.

That's what we've done this week, here at our house. We have eaten healthy food (with only a few lapses). We have gotten lots of exercise (*more* than I needed). And we are wearing masks (at least at times like this). We gave up on social distancing, but for the most part, we are practicing *wellness* so we don't get sick.

Thanks for your help, guys (and girl). Now you can say that you rode on the lawn mower and canoed . . . and *preached* with Grandpa.

In this series we've talked about seven common spiritual ailments—grumps; lite-headedness; tribal fever; bumps, scrapes, and fractures; affluenza; sensualitis; and drift—and in this message we will review some of the remedies that we've learned.

It's always good to *recover* from these ailments. Even better is to take preventative measures to protect ourselves *from* these ailments; and we can do that by building practices of **spiritual wellness** into our lives.

The final message in this "Ailments" series does not deal with any particular illness, but, rather, with the everyday habits of spiritual *health* and *strength*.

And this is the encouragement in this message:

When we are healthy and strong in the Lord,
when we are *practiced* and *skilled* in the basic disciplines of following Jesus
we are not only protected from the ailments and attacks of darkness;
we become agents of change and healing in the world.

The text today is a familiar one, Ephesians 6:10-18,
where the apostle Paul uses armor to illustrate the ways we can protect ourselves
from ailments and adversaries in the Christian life.

Ephesians 6, starting with verse 10:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For 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. 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, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. . . And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

You may wonder what a listing of *ancient armor* has to do with us today.

Think about that for a moment.

Over two thousand years—from the apostle Paul until now—
the *world* has changed, *nations* have changed, *technology* has changed;
but people have not changed.

Hearts and *minds* and *bodies* need the same kind of protection now as ever.

Soldiers and police officers today wear bullet-resistant kev-lar vests, body armor,
to protect the core of their body, the modern equivalent of a breastplate.

They wear helmets, not of iron or bronze, but of a hard synthetic substance,
with clear, plastic visors to protect their head and eyes.

They wear a utility belt packed with equipment:

a radio, baton, knife, taser, mace, flashlight, and handcuffs.

They carry a handgun in place of a sword.

They wear heavy shoes or boots,

and in some circumstances, as in riots, they carry a shield.

Whatever we read here in *Ephesians* is as up-to-date, sadly, as the national news the past two weeks.

The point Paul is making is that in the Christian life we need protective equipment as good and strong as the equipment of a soldier or police officer because we contend with three great foes.

Over the centuries, Christian preachers and teachers have referred to these adversaries as: the world, the flesh, and the devil.

We are undermined from *within* by a fallen nature, seduced from *without* by the lures of an unholy culture, and oppressed from *beyond* by the dark forces of the unseen world.

If we do not have protective practices in place—we are *vulnerable* to the wiles of the devil, *susceptible* to the besetting sins of our culture and *compromised* by our own weaknesses.

Paul first used the metaphor of protective equipment in 1 Thessalonians 5:8

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

He described them in a single phrase in 2 Corinthians 6:7

Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves . . . with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left.

And in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, he elaborated on their use and power.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Finally, in this passage in *Ephesians*, Paul develops the metaphor most fully and links each piece of equipment to specific practices by which we can protect ourselves *for spiritual wellness and strength*.

Let's look at them, beginning with the helmet of salvation. The **helmet of salvation** depicts the essential truths of the gospel—the facts about Jesus life, death, and resurrection.

When believe this *Good News* with our mind,
 and assent by faith, we have full assurance of our salvation
 and are protected from doubts and misgivings prompted by the devil.
 Especially at a time like now,
 when we are under pressure from a worldwide pandemic
 and, in the last 14 days, by a horrific instance of racism
 and the ensuing eruptions of anger, fear, protest, and violence,
 we want to be sure of our salvation;
 because the *ultimate source of peace*, no matter what we encounter,
 is knowing that our eternal destiny is certain.

On Easter Sunday, we were reminded that
 the same power that raised Jesus from the dead—
 gives us a new *heart*, a new *life*, and, one day, a new eternal *body*.

When we trust Jesus Christ as our Savior
 and our allotted years on earth are complete,
 whether by a natural *or premature* death,
 the mighty resurrection power of God
 will sweep us into heaven with a new, strong, glorious, resurrection body.

The *ultimate protection* against every earthly distress or danger
 is our assurance of eternal life with Jesus.
 When we trust Jesus as Savior, we put the helmet of salvation in place.

To be sure that our heart—the control center of life—is firm in following Jesus,
 we put on the **kev-lar vest of righteousness**;
 which means, most simply, that our relationships are right and in good order.

We make sure of this, first of all, with Jesus.
 All our sins are covered by his suffering and death on the cross;
 but we never treat any instance of wrongdoing lightly or casually.
 Anytime we are convicted of sinful behavior, words, or attitudes
 we promptly ask Jesus to forgive us.

We can use the pattern that we learned in the
 “Bumps, Scrapes, and Fractures” message:

I was wrong to [and we name our sin]
 I don't want to do it again.
 Will you forgive me?
 And our Heavenly Father will always respond, “Yes, I forgive you.”

If we have offended someone in our household or elsewhere, Paul urges us to go to them *that same day* and use the same pattern to make things right.

And when we are overwhelmed by the hatred and conflict in our world we can become peacemakers, as we learned from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the message “Tribal Fever,”

“The great peace for which we long can only grow again from peace between twos and threes.”

We establish the regular practice, as Jesus taught us, of asking our Heavenly Father to forgive our trespasses; we keep our earthly relationships in good repair; we become peacemakers within our spheres of influence; and, when we do, we keep the kevlar vest of righteousness in place.

The sword of the Spirit is clearly identified as the Word of God. The **belt of truth** points to the essential facts of the Gospel. The **shield of faith** enables us to deflect Satan’s lies with the truth in God’s Word.

Every day we are bombarded with *controversy*: conflicting news stories, contending opinions, commentary, arguments, claims, and counter-claims. To find our way through this blur of confusion, we need God’s Truth as a compass to find our way.

In March, in the message on “Lite-headedness,” we talked about ways to build God’s truth in our lives. We do this when we come to worship on Sunday morning. when we take time to read the Bible; when we participate in a small group; when we study the Bible; when we memorize portions of Scripture.

In the same way that we eat healthy meals, we feed on the truth of God’s Word for spiritual strength and direction—which is essential protection from the world, the flesh, and the devil—*and* a very basic practice for spiritual wellness.

Since prayer seems to naturally flow from attention to the Bible, we also build prayer into our lives.

Prayer is not linked to a piece of armor in this passage, but is named as essential to our protection. Prayer *reenergizes us, replenishes* our spiritual reserves and *connects* us more deeply to Jesus.

Prayer is also an *offensive weapon*.
By prayer, we bring the *power of God* to bear on the distresses of hurting, broken people, and on the sin and misery in our nation and world. We can do some things on our own, but with God, when we pray, nothing is impossible!

And because we sit with Jesus in the heavenly realms, with all the rights and privileges of this exalted place, we can pray with *authority*—in Jesus' Name!

Finally, the **sturdy footwear of peace** moves us for action. The shoes or boots of soldiers enable them to move easily and quickly. This piece of equipment—depicting the Good News of peace—enable us to move purposefully and promptly in witness and service.

To sum up,
as important as healthy habits of eating, sleeping, and exercise, are five basic practices of spiritual wellness:
above all, to trust Jesus as Savior;
Whenever needed, to mend our relationship with Jesus and others;
to soak up the truth in the Bible;
to take time for prayer;
and to step out in witness and service.

As we establish these practices of spiritual **wellness** in our daily life, they enable us to stand firm against the wiles of the devil, and to defeat his schemes in our lives, and in the lives of others.

Squirrels

One of my delights is watching birds just outside our front bay window. We have rigged up a combination of two bird-feeders. One is a tube for seeds, which brings sparrows, wrens, and goldfinches. Another is a wire box for suet, which attracts cardinals and woodpeckers. All of this is rigged up to a wooden crosspiece with a pulley and camo-colored rope so I can lower and raise it to add more seeds and suet.

The great bugaboo of this bird-feeding contraption is *squirrels*.
 So I position the feeders away from any tree branches
 that would give easy access by squirrels.
 and I have added miscellaneous pieces of scrap hardware
 and intertwined cords on top the crosspiece
 so squirrels cannot hang from the crosspiece by their toes to get at the food.
 Every once and a while, however, some daring and agile squirrel
 will attempt to get through my defenses.
 so I need to continually perfect my protective strategies.

Similarly, the devil is more *wily* and *agile* and *persistent* than a **squirrel**,
 he is more *slithery* and *strikes faster* than a **snake**.
 And, as Peter writes, he "*prowls* around like a roaring **lion**,
 seeking someone to devour."
 But we can *resist* and *defeat* the world, the flesh, *and* the devil
 by taking protective measures for spiritual wellness.

The overall message of the book of *Ephesians*,
 provides remedies for common spiritual ailments;
 and, even better, gives us a biblical prescription for spiritual wellness.

Some of us, here today, have walked with Jesus a long time,
 and these practices are so fully established in our life
 that they come as naturally as breathing.

Others of us, for one reason or another,
 may see these spiritual practices as far beyond our capabilities.

If that is the case with you,
 I want to remind you of a famous Chinese proverb:
 "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

Our broken world is desperate for people who are healthy and strong in the Lord.
 When we are *practiced* and *skilled* in using the weapons of righteousness,
 we are not only protected from the kingdom of darkness;
 we become agents of change and healing
 who advance Jesus' kingdom of light in the world.

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