

## SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

January 10, 2021

**Overcomer**

**“The Breastplate of Righteousness”**

**Ephesians 6: 12-14**

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We experienced what felt like a dark day in the history of our country this week. As I saw the images of people violently storming the US Capitol, it was hard to believe what I was witnessing. I was embarrassed and ashamed of my fellow Americans. It was a heartbreak moment for our nation. There is much evil that we must overcome in this moment.

Regardless of your political affiliation, God is continuing to call us here at Killearn United Methodist Church to our mission to present Christ, encourage holiness and growth, and send out to present Christ. We are called to be people who speak the truth in love. We are called to resist deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to deliberately mislead others. Apparently, many people were not paying attention to our conversation on the belt of truth from last Sunday. We know that God's truth holds everything else together.

Now, maybe more than ever, it is so very important to have a Biblical understanding of God's righteousness and God's justice. The apostle Paul uses this image of the breastplate in Ephesians 6 as we continue in our Overcomer series. Hear the word of the Lord:

***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.*** Ephesians 6: 12-14 (New International Version)

Paul uses this image of righteousness as a breastplate. The piece of equipment that protects the core of our own humanity. It literally protects our heart and our lungs. It enables us to survive when evil comes to break our hearts and upset the rhythm of the life that God breathes into us. I have a friend who is a police officer and does a lot of undercover work. On most days on duty, my friend wears a multi-threat level vest to protect herself. When she is working undercover, she does not wear a vest. She has talked about feeling vulnerable without her vest, especially when there is a significant threat to her life. I think of God's breastplate of righteousness in very similar way. God's righteousness helps to transform us more to be like Jesus, and it protects, especially where there is a threat to our discipleship as followers of Jesus.

Paul uses the Greek word δικαιοσύνης (dikaiosunēs) to describe this breastplate, this piece of gear that God has given us to overcome the challenges that we face. It is most often translated as righteousness or justice throughout the Old and New Testaments. This word describes what is in conformity to God's own being.

The apostle Paul uses dikaiosunēs in a peculiar way in his writings. The Jews as a people and many new Jewish Christians supposed that they secured the favor of God by conforming to the requirements of the Mosaic law. Their thinking was the more they conformed to the law, the more assurance they had of their relationship with God and their salvation. However, Paul is always encouraging people to be transformed by God's character rather than relying on faithfulness to the law as some kind of checklist for righteousness.

So what does righteousness that conforms to God's own character look like? I think a life rooted in God's righteousness is twofold both inward and outward.

First, our integrity is about living into what is right. It's about pursuing God's holiness. Integrity is all about being honest and showing consistent and uncompromising commitment to God's values in our life. I love the way that Paul describes this pursuit in Ephesians 5.

***You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord, so live your life as children of light. Light produces fruit that consists of every sort of goodness, justice (dikaiosunēs), and truth. Therefore, test everything to see what's pleasing to the Lord, and don't participate in the unfruitful actions of darkness. Instead, you should reveal the truth about them. It's embarrassing to even talk about what certain persons do in secret. But everything exposed to the light is revealed by the light. Everything that is revealed by the light is light. Therefore, it says, Wake up, sleeper! Get up from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.*** Ephesians 5: 8-12 (Common English Bible)

The truth is that every single one of us falls short of God's intended righteousness in our lives. We were once in darkness, but God has brought us into the light. Our character as followers of Jesus should consist of goodness, righteousness, and truth. We should test everything in our life to see what's pleasing to God. There is a strong word here to us not to participate in unfruitful actions of darkness. Being people of integrity is so important.

**What are ways that you pursue God's righteousness personally in your life?** The only way for us to become people that conform to God's character is to spend time in God's presence. We talk so much about Scripture, prayer, and worship, because they are some primary ways to experience God's presence. I have shared with you before about banded discipleship - we were created for community with each other. I meet weekly with 5 people in a discipleship band, and we talk about how it is with our souls.

We share about our struggles and successes. We ask each other, how might the Spirit and the Scripture be speaking in your life? We also ask each other about any sin that we want to confess or any secrets we need to share. Darkness has the power to consume our souls, but everything exposed to the light is revealed by the light. Living in God's light is so much better than anything the darkness has to offer.

This pursuit is not a one-time trip where we arrive on time to our destination. I love the way Martin Luther describes this journey towards righteousness.

***This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.” - Martin Luther***

We must seek after God's righteousness in our lives every day. Some of us are really invested in the spiritual practices to experience God's presence and growing as people of integrity. As 2021 begins, maybe it's time to try a new spiritual practice. It could be spiritual reading, journeying, listening to worship music, giving to support ministry, or having solitude with God. If you are especially feeling like there is some distance between you and God, it is definitely time for a new spiritual practice in your life.

God's righteousness is not just about our inner life. It is also about how we live in our culture. Justice is about doing what is right. It's about pursuing God's holiness on earth as it is in heaven. Justice is about ushering in the kingdom of God into our world. I love the way the prophet Isaiah proclaims the justice of Jesus.

**A child is born to us, a son is given to us,  
and authority will be on his shoulders.  
He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.**

**There will be vast authority and endless peace  
for David's throne and for his kingdom,  
establishing and sustaining it  
with justice and righteousness now and forever.**

**Isaiah 9:6-7 (Common English Bible)**

**What are ways that you pursue God's righteousness personally in our society?**  
Our culture has turned justice issues into something that might feel so complicated and convoluted. I don't always know what our policy should be for universal healthcare, immigrant reform, climate change, racial equality, or so many other justice issues. Too often we allow the voice of the extremes to drive these conversations. Maybe we need a more streamlined approach. Jesus communicates pretty clearly about how we should

treat other people.

***Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer the other one as well. If someone takes your coat, don't withhold your shirt either. Give to everyone who asks and don't demand your things back from those who take them. Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you.*** Luke 6:28-31 (Common English Bible)

Jesus, are you serious!?!? We are supposed to bless people who curse us and pray for them. Whoever you consider to be the worst, Jesus is calling us to treat them in the way that we want them to treat us. If we want to see God's kingdom come and God's will be done in our society, then we need to start by treating people better.

I am tired of the extreme voices dominating so much of our public disclosure. There are many people in our country who greatly fear that radical reforms will destroy their way of life. No one likes to lose the things that they enjoy. Yet in order to treat people better, we have to start sharing more of what we have with people who have less. Jesus says if someone takes your coat, don't withhold your shirt either. It breaks my heart that so many people even in our country who don't have enough food to eat, don't have a place to live, and don't have the same opportunities to enjoy life like I have enjoyed it. Our country is supposed to be a place that offers life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness not just for a select few, but for all people.

On the other hand, there are many people in our country who greatly fear that the status quo will continue. They have experienced the short end of the stick and feel forgotten, disregarded, and even oppressed. If someone slaps you in the face, Jesus calls you to turn the other cheek. Getting slapped in the face is awful. However, it does not give you permission to be awful to others. In order to treat people better, let's start by resisting to strike back. Every protest must be nonviolent. Every social post needs to be respectful. Treat people that are resistant to change in the same way that you want them to treat you in return. Allow God to protect your heart and your life. Also, know that there are good people from diverse backgrounds who stand with you. You are not alone.

It sounds impossible. How can stand in the middle of this great struggle? We must be committed to being people of integrity and of justice. We need God's righteousness to order our inner life and our world around us. I want to encourage you with this good word from Dietrich Bonhoeffer who took a firm stand with Jesus against the evils of the Nazis in his own day.

***The moment we begin to feel satisfied that we are making some progress along the road of sanctification, it is all the more necessary to repent and confess that all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags. Yet the Christian life is not one of gloom, but of ever increasing joy in the Lord.***" - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

In this moment, we need a spirit of humility. God's righteousness is so much greater than our own way of thinking and living. I am praying for our church family to experience the ever-increasing joy of Lord as we pursue God's righteousness in every way. As we continue to worship, I want to pray in a spirit of repentance and confession.

**Merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart. We have failed to be an obedient church. We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, and we have not heard the cry of the needy. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Icebreaker I – What were your first thoughts when you heard about the protest turning violent at the Capital on Wednesday, January 6?

Icebreaker II – Have you ever participated in a peaceful protest? Have you ever been caught up in a riot?

1. What piece of armor do you need the most in your life right now?
2. What have you been struggling against lately?
3. According to Ephesians 6:12, name who is our struggle NOT against?
4. According to Ephesians 6:12, list the four entities with whom our struggle IS against?
5. Read Ephesians 6:10-11. "<sup>10</sup>Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and his powerful strength. <sup>11</sup>Put on God's armor so that you can make a stand against the tricks of the devil."
6. What do you think it looks like to be "on your guard" against the tricks of the devil in practical, everyday terms?
7. In what ways, if any, have you noticed spiritual apathy or indifference in your own life recently?
8. What are some spiritual disciplines or practices in which you consistently engage?
9. How do you respond to people who treat you disrespectfully?
10. How can we pray for you this week?