



Roanoke, Virginia

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## ***“Dress Code”***

*Ephesians 6:10-20*

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The letter of Ephesians is written while Paul is in prison. Bound in chains, guarded by Roman soldiers, Paul uses his current setting as imagery to illustrate how the Christian church is equipped to face the evils of the world—equipped with the great goodness that is required to stand up and stand firm against the evil powers of a world where the church is growing and struggling. Our reading is Ephesians 6:10-20. Listen to the Word of God then and the Word of God now.

<sup>10</sup>Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. <sup>11</sup>Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. <sup>12</sup>For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. <sup>13</sup>Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. <sup>14</sup>Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. <sup>15</sup>As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup>With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup>Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. <sup>18</sup>Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. <sup>19</sup>Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, <sup>20</sup>for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.



For me, it is difficult to read this text and not want to jump right into the battles we face today, not how Paul is preaching, but by meeting violence with violence. To be honest, the recent news of Colombia and Afghanistan has challenged me in the ways of Pauline battle tactics. There is persistent and almost overwhelming darkness that is present in our world today. Colombia's civil unrest was thought to be declared over in 2016, when a peace treaty was signed between opposing sides. This unrest began back in the 60s and for years everyday life was marked by bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations. They agreed to stop the fighting and form a postwar court in order to find the truth about the more than 220,000 deaths, 22,000 kidnappings-for-ransom, and the years of captivity and imprisonment of leaders and civilians of both sides. But as the Court digs up the truth, division continues to erode progress. Because what truth can be trusted?

The news coming from Afghanistan is hard to digest. We read the horrific coverage that women are being killed for not wearing the proper attire the Taliban demands. Yet the Taliban leadership tells us they are fighting for women's rights, that they want a country where women are applauded, not abused, and respected, not reduced. We witness the photos of suffering and confused children being lifted over the Kabul Airport barricades to safety, yet these children are crying out for their parents not knowing that safety is only found in the arms of strangers or in jam-packed airplanes headed to some foreign land. All they want is to be with their mom or dad. All their parents want is for them to be safe. The sights and sounds of this present darkness, and over the past two-decades in that region, are almost too overwhelming. Our battle certainly seems to be against blood and flesh, AND against rulers and authorities of evil. To quote the psalmist: how long O Lord!

Even more we read of the devastation in Haiti. The recent magnitude 7.2 earthquake violently shook the country two weekends ago, which added to the devastation of an already impoverished country still reeling from a recent presidential assassination and recovering from a previous earthquake more than a decade ago. How long O Lord must your people suffer?

And we find forces of evil in our own backyard. Polarization and division have become part of our identity. We have camped in like-minded communities, pointing fingers at the other, blaming "those people" for the suffering of our nation. What is our right as an American vs our right as a human being? Are they the same or different based on ethnicity, status, or ability? How do individual rights coexist with our right to care for each other, or be a neighbor to the other? Will individualism overshadow our dependence on each other? And the news of the rising number of covid cases here in our country and around the world. The Pandemic is still among us. We are all in this battle. But the ways in which we are to combat this virus often lead to another divisive discussion. It all feels so overwhelming at times. To add to this, battles are ensuing against fires and floods, droughts and hunger, inequality and isolation, sexism, racism, addictions, global warming, and adding to it even more the mental evils and personal struggles of everyday life. Overwhelming indeed. O Lord, how long must I cry out for help, and you do not answer?!?!



The Apostle Paul writes to a church while he and they are experiencing struggles. Paul writes from prison dealing with his own battles of isolation and captivity among other things that come from being Roman prisoner. The church of the first century had its struggles as well. Division as well crept into the foundation of the church: what truth is the truth? The rise of Roman power and ambitious dominion of those in power broke the social union of all creation (the divinely creative union): man was pitted against man; class divided from class; nation from nation; ideology from ideology; Jew from Gentile; Pagan from God-fearing. There was literal war among nations; there was war within nations, within communities and villages. Heavy taxes expanded favoring the elite, pushing the poor further and further down. Patriarchy placed all power in the hands of males, forced slave labor, ideologies that claimed divine blessing on those in power alone. The letter was meant to combat the dividing force of evil and celebrate the unity found in Christ, for without Christ there is only disunity and disharmony.. It was common belief that the disharmony extended into the heavenly places, between the powers of good and evil, that there was a literal cosmic battle of God and demons. And worst of all, there was disharmony between God and humans, disharmony between the Creator and the created. And as the list of struggles go on, there is division in the inner places of the self—in every person there is a struggle of conscience, between what is good and what is evil, right and wrong.

Paul writes to estranged people facing many problems. So, what are they to do?

How are they to fight all these things?

Paul tells them to get one thing straight to begin with: we are not fighting against enemies of blood and flesh. Our battle is bigger and deeper than that. We are not fighting against that Roman soldier, or this foreign legion. Think bigger! Our battle is against the systems that continue to herald foreign occupation and oppression. Our battle is against the authorities who make declarations that pit community against community... we are fighting the deep essence of sin and evil, Paul says. We are fighting the injustice that keeps a man like me in jail for preaching the good news of a new kingship. We are fighting against the evil that binds me in chains for including Gentiles in the kingdom of God, that calls Gentiles and Jews one body in Christ. We are fighting against the evils of a world that hunts those who follow a new way of living, one marked by service to the other in love, not service to a throne in fear. “Church” Paul says, “we are fighting for a truth that is mysterious, a truth that is unified by the gift of grace, a truth that claims us beloved in the midst of sin, a truth that calls us to pray for those who persecute you, to give to those who ask and require nothing in return, a truth that turns the other cheek, a truth that calls us to place the sword back into the sheath and fight with Sword of the Spirit.” And Paul continues, “as we step onto the battlefield equipped with mercy and love, pray, pray, and pray some more. Pray for your sisters and brothers in faith, pray for yourself, and pray for me—so we may stand firm and boldly proclaim the gospel to all the nations!”

Looking through your window into the world in which you live today, a world that seems to be falling apart, it all may seem too overwhelming. Afghanistan, Haiti, Colombia, Covid, inequality,



poverty, mental illness, and the list can go on. You might ask: How am I to right the wrongs of the world? Who am I to right the wrongs of the world?

Friends, you are God's beloved child, redeemed by grace, given the power and strength of the Holy Spirit. So, you stand up! You stand up and stand firm in the knowledge that death does not have the final say. You stand up and fight for the goodness of humanity! You stand up and you dress for heavenly success here on earth! You throw off the wicked ways of the world, take off the garments of greed, malice, anger, and wrath. We are made new in Christ. We have been given new clothes through baptism. Put on humility, put on gentleness, put on compassion and forgiveness. Stand up to the sins of the world and be protected by the full armor of God. Stand up and fasten the belt of truth across your waist, a truth that can withstand trials and struggles because it is an everlasting truth of love. Stand up to speak the truth in love. Stand up and protect your hearts with the breastplate of righteousness, which protects your core identity in Christ. Stand up and lace the shoes on our feet that will make you quick and nimble to continually proclaim the gospel of peace, a peace that surpasses all understanding. Stand up and be protected by the shield of faith, a shield that blocks the false teachings of the world, a shield that forever expands to include our sisters and brothers standing with us. Stand up and put on the helmet of our salvation, a helmet that reminds us that our salvation is not logical, it is a gift that is freely given, not earned. Stand up! We do not fight with the blades of the sword, but with the blades that are sharper than any two-edged sword, the sword of the Spirit. We fight with the Word of God. And it is in the Word of God that tells us Jesus and Paul passed on to their disciples a collective and historical understanding of the nature of sin and evil, against which individuals must continue to stand up and fight and resist. Jesus and the prophets judged the city, the nation, the systems first, then the individual. Humanity is flawed, yes, but the question for today is our collective sin. Rebuke the sin and condemn the sinful action first, not the individual.

Stand up to the discrimination that claims one race superior to another. Stand up to the distribution of wealth that expands the socio-economic gaps. Stand up to cultural beliefs that claim worth is calculated by likes and shares, and the idea that beauty is only found in certain bodies. Stand up!

We are equipped to stand up and stand firm against the atrocities of this world. But you do not go at it alone. We are bound together in one body, the one body of Christ, shielded, protected, strengthened by the gift of the Spirit.

It's true, it's easy to feel overwhelmed with so much out of our control. We know how the ultimate story ends, but it is God's to write. So, in the meantime, as we head out to face the evils of our world, we have been given new ways to wage war. We have the weapons of peacemaking, prayer, and the grace of our salvation; we have the armor of faith, taking comfort in God's word and gaining strength in the prayers that have been prayed through the generations that also watched the world through anxious and lament-filled hearts. We have the weapon of a love that is



revolutionary, a love that is brave enough to see no stranger, a love that sees the other as a connected part not yet known.

Stand up and stand firm against the evils of the world, And as one pastor puts it: “Remember: evil hates good. So, create good wherever you are.”<sup>1</sup> You may not change the world. But you will change the world in which you stand. And that is enough for now.

To God be the glory. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Grace Reynolds of Madison Valley PC

