

Message
August 22-23, 2009
Ephesians 6:10-20 and John 6:56-69
Grow Strong in the Lord
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Around the beginning of the first century, to qualify as a Roman soldier you need to prove your strength and endurance. One test is marching on a hot summer day, 24 miles in 5 hours carrying a 70 pound backpack. You're far more useful if you're strong and brave rather than tall and big.

Days are long. Living and sleeping arrangements are close quarters and meals consist largely of some kind of porridge and bread. The enemy is often close at hand. So, you're expected to see with clear, observant eyes. Muscular shoulders, arms and legs are a must. Days are long.

Your uniform begins with a breast plate of chain mail, segmented, scaled armor mounted on leather. Chain mail has some movement to it, which is important because you need flexibility in battle to help protect. From the waist down, you wear a skirt of leather strips plated with metal to protect your legs and to give you continued flexibility. On your feet you wear strong, leather sandals with nails protruding from the soles for extra grip and sustainability. Support and durability are important. So your iron helmet protects your head and neck. Roman soldiers are proud, standing straight and tall, keeping their head held high; no easy task with the weight and discomfort of this uniform.

To hold a position in the Roman Army is a prestigious vocation. However, it hasn't always carried this distinction. Early on the army consisted of poor peasant farmers who would journey in from the fields for a summer of service and then journey back out at the fall harvest to tend to their crops. In time, however, statesman Marius, reorganized and reformed the army giving it honor and professionalism. Roman soldiers took their jobs very seriously. Loyalty to the Roman Empire trumped all causes. After all, this empire was so great and so forceful that the emperor surveying his domain proclaimed, "I rule the entire civilized world". By Jesus' time, while Caesar Augustus ruled peacefully, the military power of Rome prevailed, imposing high taxes, enforcing strict laws, and demanding obedience through aggressive, brutal oppression.

But, the kingdom of God has a radically different view, seen through a different lens. You see, kingdom people are chosen by God, called to bring about God's kingdom of peace, and justice, here and now. Kingdom people follow a different kind of leader; a ruler who dines with sinners, heals the sick, cares for the lost and forgotten, loves the miserable, the ugly, and the troubled; a leader who chooses to love and show compassion and understanding. In God's kingdom Jesus teaches us *give to anyone who asks, if anyone wants to borrow, do not turn away...love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, set no bounds on your love...come to terms with your opponent,...do not judge and you will not be judged, forgive and you will be forgiven, give and there will be gifts for you...the first will be last and the last will be first.*

This is kingdom living, this is God's empire, bought at a high price, with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Living God's kingdom life requires some strength and perseverance. It takes some will. So, we need to suit up. We clothe ourselves with truth, justice, righteousness, mercy and faithfulness. We arm ourselves with the love of God. That means, wearing God's uniform looks a little bit different.

Florida gators quarterback Tim Tebow is all about winning, and being a champion. He should be. Tebow is the recipient of the Davey O'Brien National Quarterback Award, the Maxwell Award, the Heisman trophy and an endless list of recognitions and accomplishments. Tebow lives in a world that struggles against the power of evil. Football does not always shine the best light. Players are suspended from the NFL for illegal dogfighting rings; formal apologies are necessary because of inappropriate public statements; players are charged with physical assault, arrested on drug and weapons charges. But, Tebow, he stands his ground. He puts on his uniform and he wears the power of God.

Tebow, born to missionary parents in the Philippines, returns each summer to spread the good news of Jesus Christ and minister to kids in orphanages founded by his parents. During the season, he witnesses at Florida prisons to prisoners who live with no hope, no support. Tebow's message: it's not about having trophies and being a champion, it's about knowing how much God loves us and having a relationship with Jesus Christ. Inviting inmates to come on stage and join him to be his brother in Jesus Christ, Tebow is all about finishing strong in the power of the Lord.

But, for the apostle Paul, writing to the struggling churches of Asia Minor, he's not the conquering hero of his time. In fact, he is, for Christ, "an ambassador in chains," bound in captivity, guarded by the daunting force of oppression. His persecution, however, is merely fuel for the apostle's words of hope.

The letter to the Ephesians, tells God's purpose for us, that in Christ, we are to know the blessing of his grace, his love. God chooses us, in Christ, *before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus for the good works which God has designated to make up our way of life. Grow firm in the God's saving grace; grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth of God's love. We are God's holy people, knit together for the work of service to build up the Body of Christ.* So get strong, be steadfast the apostle warns us. Tighten up our belt of truth. Get right with God and wear righteousness proudly. Avoid the darts of nasty words. Get some good walking shoes on and spread the good news. Throw a coat of trust about you. Carry a sword that cuts through all that hurts and destroys only to carve places for the peace and reconciliation. Know, that you are crowned with the glory of God's saving grace. Wear this outfit and you're dressed to kill. Keep this holy outfit fresh through constant prayer. Because, sometimes we're face to face with our demons; those forces of evil and darkness that battle within us. But, the holy forces of God always win out. Pray that we are strong in the Lord, to stand our ground, and pray this over and over, constantly. Don't tire.

Taking up the armor of God isn't always an individual quest. The writer to the Ephesians asks us to strengthen ourselves as the church. As the body of Christ we hold each other accountable. We help one another outfit ourselves in what is just and right, growing in God's love in Christ and in one another.

This past week, we were privileged to share our space with about 45 men and women from the CARITAS program. We were delighted to host our guests and we're forever grateful for the most gracious hospitality offered by all of you. Sandra Garrett and Jenni Pandack, the heads of CARITAS, have shared that somewhere in the neighborhood of 200 people served with CARITAS. Thank you for cooking meals, packing lunches, spending the night, scrubbing dishes, playing games, and most of all, taking the time to make new friends. Our guests witnessed the true armor of God; you, clothed in love and mercy. And, because of how you wear God's grace, they too were able to dress themselves in the armor of God and journeyed throughout their days with hope for a better life.

Each night a faithful group of about 10 of our guests gathered for bible study and prayer. On Thursday night, as we came together, one woman, who normally wears joy and encouragement, shared her frustration of the day. It seems that if you're not on "reserve" with CARITAS, you need to "reup" every week and ask permission to be invited back into the program. Our friend spent a long hot day, sitting with her case manager coming up empty with unanswered questions. See, she's only been in Richmond about 2 weeks and she doesn't know where to go to find safe shelter, if she can't be in CARITAS. Sadly, on Thursday, she didn't get the reassurance of a spot for this next week. The small group listened attentively as our friend worked herself into a fretful state of fear and anxiety. At one point, tears streaming down her face, she couldn't catch her breath and she hyper ventilated. A kind group member quickly fetched her a glass of water. Mostly, the group wore compassionate silence.

After a bit, those with experience in CARITAS began to offer suggestions about how she could secure her CARITAS spot for next week. Calming herself, she listened carefully as, one by one, they explained how she needed to travel on the bus, where to go, who to see and the questions she would need to ask. Again, disappointed, and frustrated, she became overwhelmed and agitated. She had no means of transportation to get to and from once the CARITAS bus dropped her at central intake. The walk to her solution would take all day. Then, one quiet, patient, understanding member of the group carefully opened her backpack and rummaged around. She pulled out one treasured possession and handed it to our friend. "Here," she said with a toothless grin, "take this bus ticket. It will get you where you need to go tomorrow."

Once again, the group fell silent. Our CARITAS friends don't appear to have much to outfit themselves with. All they own they carry on their backs. But, oh my, how they are armored with the strength of God in Christ to persevere, to love and serve with grace and mercy.

God outfits us in the gear we need to be strong in our struggle against our challenges. Be strong the way Jesus is strong. Jesus puts on the full armor of God. Clothed in God's righteousness, he bravely offers the difficult teaching, *whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in that person...eat this bread, and live forever*. For many, the teaching is too difficult. Some will not believe that through the cross and the breaking open of the tomb, Christ promises us healing, whole, loving, eternal life in God. Jesus is well armored and he calls us to clothe ourselves in the power of God as well.

Kingdom living has its moments of perplexity and confusion. But, what wins out in kingdom living is how in Jesus Christ, we shine with the glory of God's love and beam with truth. Through him, we are made free to release the chains that bind us. Free to be God's holy people, strong in his power, equipped to march victorious in his saving grace.