

"GETTING ALL DRESSED UP"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

As a young man, Edgar Allen Poe received an appointment to attend West Point, but after a few weeks there he realized that he wasn't really cut out to be a cadet at the military academy. He didn't like all the rules and regulations and all of the training he had to go through, so one day, when all of the cadets were supposed to turn out in formation on the parade ground to march before the generals, Edgar Allen Poe checked his rule book to find out the dress code for that occasion. He read that white gloves and a white belt were required and so that's all he put on: white gloves and a white belt. Nothing else. Needless to say it was enough to get him thrown out of the academy...which is what he really wanted.

DEVELOPMENT

It's not enough to face the world...wearing just a white belt and white gloves. Why do we wear clothes...anyway? Let me offer two reasons, and they both start with the letter "F".

One is FUNCTION. And the other is FASHION. We wear clothes for privacy and to protect us from the elements. That's all a part of function. For example, we wear shoes to keep our feet from getting hurt, getting bruised.

A First Grade teacher tells about the time one of her students arrived at school wearing his left shoe on his right foot and the right shoe on the left foot. She told the child that he had his shoes on the wrong feet and with that the child burst into tears and said, "But teacher....these are the only feet I have!" We wear shoes to protect our feet. Function.

We wear coats to keep us warm. A mother was talking to her daughter, Ashley, as they were dressing to go outside. Ashley asked her mother why her heavy winter coat was so bulky and squeezey. Her mother said that it was that way because it was filled with DOWN. "Oh" said Ashley with great understanding, "And my summer coat is filled with UP...and that's why it's so light!" Clothes keep us warm and dry and protect us from the elements. But they also make a statement about who we are and where we come from and how we feel about ourselves. And all of this and more is what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he tells us in his Letter to the Ephesians, to "put on the armor of God". Let's review what he is suggesting.

The imagery here is quite vivid. Christians are those who are going out into the world to do battle against evil forces. Thus we must dress as soldiers. Paul has in mind, of course, the first-century soldier. Their uniforms were more critical than today's soldier's. No tanks and armored personnel carriers to protect them. They were out there in the open - exposed.

Paul had a pretty good idea about the work of the soldier. It could be that while Paul is writing these very words that he has a chain around his right wrist and the other end of that chain is attached to the left wrist of a soldier. Paul mentions that chain in verse twenty of this chapter. He says he's a man in chains which means he is chained to a Roman soldier and if Paul were that close to a soldier every day...day in and day out...he would certainly know what soldiers wear for their business. And so he calls us soldiers in God's army...fighting evil around us every day. And in order to do that, says Paul, we should put on six pieces of clothing. Let me describe them to you.

A BELT AND A BREASTPLATE

First, says Paul, there's the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness.

The belt that Paul is talking about here isn't meant to hold up the pants of a soldier. Paul probably looked at that soldier next to him and saw that the man used his belt in a different way. This soldier was wearing a loose and floppy shirt. It was called a "tunic" and the tunic was meant to be loose so that when the soldiers were marching, or exercising, or doing the daily work, they wouldn't get too warm. But, if the soldier ever had to fight with someone else, his loose and floppy tunic could easily get in the way. It could give his opponent something to grab at and pull him down. So the soldier wore a belt and he used that belt to keep his clothes trim in battle...to keep them from getting caught or blowing around. And you must wear a belt, too, says Paul. It's the belt of truth. If you wear the belt of truth, you don't give your opponent something to grab hold of that could bring you down. Someone has rightly observed,

"The trouble with stretching the truth
is that it's apt to snap back at you".

First, a belt of truth and then a breastplate of righteousness. Now it shouldn't be too difficult for us to visualize a "breastplate of righteousness". It's like the goalie wears in hockey, or the umpire wears in baseball...the catcher, too. It provides protection over the top part of the body against hockey pucks and baseballs which come flying at great speeds.

Roman soldiers wore a smaller breastplate. It was usually made of metal, although it could be made of thick leather. It was meant to protect their hearts and lungs and stomachs from injuries. Truth and righteousness...these are the belt and the breastplate of the Christian warrior. There's no place for the sham and the shoddy in Christian living. No hypocrites need apply. Living out one's faith in Christ is serious business. We're called to walk the talk and to talk the walk.

And when we take seriously our task as soldiers of Christ, it shows in our business practices and in our treatment of friends and family members. It shows, too, in how we treat people of other races and other religions. Integrity and respect....this is the cement of our society.

I read somewhere recently the senior executives in our major corporations are worried over the declining level of ethics among many young workers. One executive who served on the Student-Affairs Committee of his Alma Mater tells of a student who was suspended by the Student Court for plagiarizing a paper. He was caught and found guilty and suspended and this brought about an uproar among the student body because this student already had a job offer and this suspension would threaten his future. The executive was bowled over by this reaction...he said it was the old story of,

"Everybody does it...that's the way
business is...so don't worry about it"

The executive shared this with the Board of his corporation and all in that Board Room felt the way he did...that this was terrible, that these young people have a totally incorrect view of what business is all about.

SHOES AND A SHIELD

The third and fourth pieces of clothing we should wear, says Paul, are the shoes of the gospel of peace and the shield of faith.

A Roman soldier's boots were supposed to be sturdy and were supposed to grip well, on all kinds of surfaces. When he wore his boots, he didn't worry about keeping his footing, just as the Gospel of Jesus gives us firm footing in all climates as we seek to live for Christ.

And the Roman shield that Paul was referring to here isn't just a small, personal shield. Paul uses a word that refers to these big, oblong shields that the Roman soldiers used for two purposes. On the one hand, they were big enough to protect him from the swords and spears being thrown at him by his enemies. But the second thing about his shield was this: each shield had grooves at the edges so that it could be fitted with the next soldier's shield. And then his with the next soldier's shield and so on...all the way down the line. And what you then have is a whole wall of protection.

Thus when the follower of Christ sets out to live the message of Christ, he or she has two sources of strength: personal faith in God and the strength of the entire Christian community with which he is linked, hooked, held together.

George MacDonald in one of his great children's fantasies, told about a girl who grew up in a very messy home, where everyone was always angry and mean and selfish. Her hair never got brushed and so they called her "Tangle". And her clothes were never clean, even though they were of the typical fashions in her world. Well, anyway...one day Tangle was sent away from home. And she was left all alone and hungry in the great forest. She would have died if she hadn't been led by a kind bird to a house in the middle of the forest. And there she met a kind woman. And this kind woman took her in. She gave Tangle a delicious meal. And she washed Tangle's clothes and she gave Tangle a place to sleep. And when Tangle woke up the next morning, she sent Tangle on a grand journey, with many strange experiences. And her new clothes helped her along the way...until one day she came finally to a palace so beautiful that she stayed there forever.

George MacDonald's story is really not just about a little girl at all. He's writing about you and men. He is talking about the homes we have in this world...not just our homes, but the home of this world itself, which is often mean and ugly and unkind. It can make us feel dirty and alone and helpless.

But remember this that there is a kind lady in this world. She is the Church and the Church of Jesus Christ bathes us in the waters of baptism and it feeds us with the Word of God and with the Sacrament of Communion - bread and wine. The Church helps us to put on these clothes that Paul here is talking about. And the Church...yes, it sends us out on many adventures...into some dark and deep forests of life....until one day we find ourselves led to the very palaces of God. It's a wonderful story! And it's happening to you and to me right now.

But here's the thing: we're still traveling with all that Tangle. We have not yet arrived at the palace and what we need to help us along the way is this clothing that the Church can give: the belt of truth. The breastplate of righteousness. The shoes of the Gospel of peace and the shield of faith.

HELMET OF SALVATION AND SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

Pieces of clothing numbers
five and six, according to

Paul, are the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit, which is the very word of God.

We all know just how important a helmet is. They protect our heads, our brains. Baseball players, hockey players, roller-bladers, cyclists...all are wearing helmets now-a-days. And our most ultimate protection is the helmet of salvation...that sense of security that we have that we are not alone in this world, but that we are surrounded at all times by God's great love.

And then Paul tells us that the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. According to the scholars, when the "word of God" is used in the New Testament it does not refer to just the Scriptures. After all, the sacred writings were not gathered into the collection we know as the Bible until much later. Now, generarly, the "word of God" refers to the "word God gives us to speak" at a critical moment, especially in the time of crisis. Think of it this way...

The late Norman Vincent Peale once told a story that appeared in a Chattanooga, Tennessee newspaper of four women in a dress shop...three clerks and one customer. The customer was in a dressing room putting on her own clothes after having tried on several new dresses. And all of a sudden the shop door burst open and in came a rough looking, burly man, a knife in one hand and a gun in the other.

"Hand over your money" he ordered. All the three women clerks could put together was fifty-five dollars which enraged the man. "Lie down on the floor" he barked, "and if you make one move, I'll kill you....."

Then he heard the woman in the dressing room. He pushed and manhandled her, taking her money. He threatened to cut her and did so lightly. And it was then that this fourth woman reacted. Pulling herself to full height, she said in a strong, clear and affirmative and authoritative voice,

"Stop this. In the NAME OF JESUS CHRIST, I COMMAND YOU to leave us alone. Stop this wickedness. Leave us alone!"

Well....a look of astonishment came over the face of this man, holding the gun and knife. Bewildered, he turned and ran from the shop, leaping into a car out front where a woman accomplice was at the wheel and they sped away, only to be caught minutes later by the police and when interrogated, he said,

"That woman in the store had a power like I've never seen before!" This lady was wielding the SWORD OF THE SPIRIT. God gave her the word to speak and she spoke it...powerfully.

POINT OF THE ARMOR

The point of the armor of God is this: it's a question of identity. Who are you....really? And do you ever stop to think of yourself as an emissary of Christ when you leave these walls and go out on the street? And if not, then these images may be lost on you. I think that if you simply see yourself as an "ordinary Joe or Jane" who lives a very ordinary life and who comes to church for a weekly "feel-good" spiritual bath, then you don't need the armor.

BUT, if you believe that there is some importance to bearing the name of Christ....if you are going from this place determined to make this a better city and a better world - a world of truth and justice, love and kindness, forgiveness and tolerance - then, brothers and sisters "in Christ", you are going to need to dress up appropriately. A belt of truth. A breastplate of righteousness. Shoes of the Gospel of peace. A shield of faith. A helmet of salvation. A sword of the spirit - which is the word of God.

I once read that when Queen Victoria ruled in England, a hundred and more years ago....she had several daughters. And her daughters were just like the girls of today in that they went to school and saw the latest fashions and they wanted to dress up and wear dresses just like the girls at school. And so they would come home...shouting and pestering their mother - who happened to be the Queen of the British Empire. And they would tell her they wanted to wear their clothes "like this and their hair like that". And she stopped them short one day and quietly said to them,

"YOU are the daughters of the Queen. And the Queen's daughters do not follow fads. They establish fashion".

That's a good word for us to remember. We are to live in society, but not to be of society. We are to be trend-setters and difference-makers until that day comes when this world become the Kingdom of our God - a Kingdom, YES...of peace, and justice and individual dignity under the Lordship of Jesus - THE CHRIST. So, put your armor on and get ready to march.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive, O God, to Your nearness and to Your presence in these quiet and reflective moments that come at the end of this August 1997 service. Wrestle with us in the deep and hidden corners of our lives where things like fear and cowardice so often take hold. Help us to put on Your armor and to go forth "fighting the good fight, keeping the faith" and one day "finishing the course", as did St. Paul....and always to Your glory. Amen.