

## **Gearing Up For The Game:**

Good morning!

It's nice to see everybody in church today!

This is a big day in the Carpenter house. It's not only Super Bowl Sunday, the Rams are in the Super Bowl and that's our team! Sam and I are die hard Rams fans. Kelley roots for the Rams because if they lose, Sam and I mope around for the rest of the week.

I've been a Rams fan all my life. Including during the long, long periods when the Rams absolutely stunk. So here they are in the big game and we're psyched! Like I said, a big day in the Carpenter house!

Oh yeah, it's my son's birthday too, he's 15 today... so there's that.

I know there are some of you here that don't care about the Super Bowl or football. But a lot of folks do. Over the last couple of years, the average American viewership of the game was between 111 and 144 million people.

So ever desiring to be relevant in society and culture, pastors all across the country are preaching sermons today that somehow try to tie themes from football, the big game, winners or whatever they can come up with, into their messages.

I am no different. Today I will try to tie this message, albeit ever so loosely, to some aspect of the big game.

But I want assure you as kickoff draws closer, I will be doing my best to adhere to the George Burns sermon principle.

George Burns was a legendary actor, comedian and writer whose career successfully spanned vaudeville, radio, movies and TV. He was known for cigars and one-liners.

The George Burns sermon principle comes from one of his one-liners that said, *“The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and to have the two as close together as possible.”*

So I'll do my best to keep this short and get you home in time for the game.

I'm calling the message today, *Gearing up for the Game.*

I don't think many would disagree that life is a full contact sport. And playing a full contact sport without the right gear, the right equipment would be really rather foolish!

That would be like Tom Brady running out onto the field to play the Super Bowl wearing tennis shorts, a tank top and a beanie. In addition to not looking good, it probably wouldn't turn out very good for him!

Likewise we need good equipment in this game, the game of life.

Because this game is by no means a walk in the park!

Jesus tells us as much... when He says in the last part of **John 16:33:**  
*“In this world you will have trouble.”*

Jesus is assuring us we are going to encounter trials and tribulations in this life, that's a fact!

In order to make it through this game in one piece and to make it through this game the way God wants us to, we must be properly equipped!

In some jobs it's good enough just to have the essential equipment nearby.

Firemen keep their gear in good shape and close at hand, so when the call comes, they can respond quickly, put on their equipment and respond to the situation.

But for Christians, we don't have that luxury.

When problems come in this life they generally come powerfully and swiftly! And if we're not already geared up and ready to go, we can quickly be overcome.

I say this, because as followers of Jesus Christ, we have an obligation to be ready and the time to get ready is now!

In the words of the Roman philosopher Publius Flavius Vegetitus Renatus: "*If you want peace, prepare for war.*"

Theodore Roosevelt said basically the same thing in a slightly different way: "*Walk softly and carry a big stick.*"

We don't want to be caught getting ready when trouble comes. We want to be ready! Because trouble is coming!

*"Ok John, you've convinced us, we need to be equipped to play this game and we need to have that equipment on yesterday."*

"So", you say, "What kind of equipment is necessary?"

I'm glad you asked!

If you brought your Bibles with you and I hope you did, I hope you always do, open them to the sixth chapter of the book of Ephesians.

Ephesians 6, verses 10-18. Here the Apostle Paul gives us a very specific list of the equipment we need to be geared up for the game.

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.<sup>11</sup> Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.<sup>12</sup> For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.<sup>13</sup> Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.<sup>14</sup> Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness,<sup>15</sup> and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.<sup>16</sup> In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one;<sup>17</sup> and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,<sup>18</sup> praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.*

First off, a little history lesson...

Paul is writing the book of Ephesians while he's in prison in Rome. It's one of four books he wrote during that time, they're known as the Prison Epistles, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, those are the four.

We know approximately when Paul was in prison so we can surmise that the letter to the Ephesians was written somewhere between 61 and 63 AD.

That's important because in the passage we just read, Paul uses the image of a Roman soldier to talk about the armor of God.

And it's a picture the people he was writing to would easily understand, because they saw Roman soldiers probably every day!

So here in chapter 6, when Paul tells the church at Ephesus to “*Put on the full armor of God...*” they get the picture.

Paul also explains the need this essential equipment. It's there in verses 11 and 12. Do you see it?

*<sup>11</sup> Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. <sup>12</sup> For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*

Just in case you hadn't noticed, there's a battle going on in and around this world!

It's not a political battle; conservative versus liberal. It's not a social battle; the haves versus the have-nots. It is a spiritual battle!

It's a supernatural battle! It's a battle of epic proportions!

This battle is raging all around us even though the war is already won!

Jesus claimed that victory in the war with his death, burial and resurrection! Yet our enemy, these rulers, authorities, the powers of this dark world, those spiritual forces of evil Paul speaks about, they continue to fight. And what's at stake are the eternal destinies of so many men, women and children!

As His children, God wants us to be aware of that battle! He wants us to know it's His battle! He tells us that several times in Scripture.

God wants us to know even though we've been saved by means of a relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ, we're still going to be affected by the battle going on around us! And God wants us to know we can still affect this battle. But only if we're able to stand in the midst of the battle!

How many know that?

**2 Corinthians 4:8-9** says: <sup>8</sup> *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;* <sup>9</sup> *persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.*

So Paul tells us to “*put on the full armor of God*”, so we are able to stand and be effective for God in this game of life!

To be able to stand though, we need to be properly equipped.

And the very first piece of equipment Paul mentions comes in verse 14, it's “*the belt of truth*”.

This isn't a belt like we're used to thinking, a strip of leather that holds up our pants. Though I'm assuming it's a good thing for your pants not to fall down while you're in battle!

The people Paul was writing to would know this belt was a girdle generally made of leather capped with iron. It was called a *cingulum* or *balteus*, and it would serve to protect the soldier's groin and the femoral arteries.

Paul calls it “*the belt of truth*”... and to the follower of Jesus the truth is essential. I believe that's why it's listed first.

The truth is the foundation of all things! The truth isn't just a concept or an opinion. The truth is a person! Jesus Christ is The Truth!

Jesus says so Himself in **John 14:6** “*I am the way and the truth and the life...*”

So the picture Paul is drawing, is one where we gird ourselves with Jesus Christ! That is to set our foundation upon to brace ourselves, to fortify ourselves and strengthen ourselves with Jesus Christ!

That seems like some pretty good advice! Doesn't it?

That's why Paul encourages us with the famous words of **Philippians 4:13**; *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*

Next, Paul calls us to put on *breastplate of righteousness*. That's in the last half of verse 14.

That's a pretty important piece of equipment! Not only for what it does, but for whose it is!

For the soldier the breastplate protected the heart and other major organs housed in the human chest. The breastplate may have been made of solid metal, but it was more often made by sewing together leather strips that had been covered with metal. It literally protected the soldier's heart!

Paul equates the breastplate with righteousness.

What is righteousness? Is it me doing things I think are right? God tells us in **Isaiah 64:6**: “*all our righteous acts are like filthy rags*” so no, that's not what righteousness is. In fact, righteousness is not primarily a behavior.

Righteous is what God is, and His righteousness is part of Him He extends to us as we, in faith, follow Christ!

Speaking of Jesus in **2 Corinthians 5:21** Paul says: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

To become the righteousness of God, you have to wrap the righteousness of God around your heart and wear it, like a breastplate!

Listen to Paul as he speaks in **Philippians 3:8-9:** <sup>8</sup> *What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ<sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.*

Remember I said the breastplate of righteousness was important not just for what it does, but for whose it is?

This passage from Philippians makes it clear this righteousness we're after is God's! And what's more, this breastplate of righteousness we are to put on is the very one God Himself puts on!

Look at **Isaiah 59:17:** *He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.*

Isaiah is talking about God in that passage! God is putting on His breastplate of righteousness and it's the very same one He offers to us! How cool is that?

After the Belt of Truth, and the Breastplate of Righteousness, Paul calls on us to fit our feet with The Gospel of Peace.

Look in verse 15: *and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.*

For the Roman soldier... his shoes... were most likely boots with nails driven through the soles... they were like cleats... allowing him to dig in against an opponent and to stand firm in the face of the oncoming onslaught. Remember, standing firm is God's command to us. And the tool He provides to help us do that... to stand firm... is the Gospel of Peace.

I've never been in battle, but it seems to me in the midst of battle, hand to hand combat, when the fighting is going on all around you, it might be easy to get caught up in the chaos of everything. And then, when things start to fall apart or the battle seems to be going against you, it seems it would be real easy to just panic.

And so it is in life. When things start to get chaotic we're tempted to retreat! We're tempted to run for cover!

But as Followers of Jesus Christ, God calls on us to stand our ground! And the means by which we are able to stand our ground, the way we can dig in against the onslaught of the enemy, is to have our feet shod with the gospel of peace!

The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ has won the victory for us over sin and death! And John 3:16 tells us; "*whosoever believes in Him*", will not perish but have eternal life! That is indeed good news! In fact, it's the best news ever! And it's true, even when things in this world seem to be falling apart!

So when the Christian is in those moments of chaotic battle, He or she can stand simply by remembering the victory of Christ on the cross and

what it means for us! And that realization is what brings us, what Paul calls in **Philippians 4:7**, “*the peace that passes all understanding.*”

Peace is the Bible is not defined as the world defines peace primarily as a lack of war. Peace in the Bible comes when we have a right relationship with God! And a right relationship with God comes only through a genuine relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ!

In that relationship it doesn't matter what's happening around you! In that relationship you could lose your job, your health, your loved ones, even your own physical life! But if you truly have that relationship – a right relationship with God – you can have peace!

Next, Paul calls on us to take up *the shield of faith*, that's in verse 16.

The shield Paul is talking of here though, isn't one of those small, round metal shields you've seen gladiators fight with to deflect sword blows... or that Captain America tosses around. The shield Paul is talking about... is a full length shield made of wood, and cloth, and covered with leather hides. This kind of shield was some three and a half feet to four feet tall and close to three feet wide.

This shield was usually soaked in water before going into battle and it would retain its wetness for some time, so when an enemy rained down pitch covered flaming arrows the shield would catch them and not burst into flames. Instead, those flaming arrows would just fizzle out in the wet leather.

Which is exactly what Paul says this shield will do. Let's read verse 16...

*<sup>16</sup> In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one;*

Notice that up until this point, every piece of equipment, the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and the gospel of peace, are all pieces of equipment we wear, things we put on. But the shield of faith is the first piece of equipment that we have to take up!

A shield is an item that does a soldier no good, if he doesn't pick it up and hold it up!

Likewise, our faith is like a shield. If we're not using it, it can't help us!

What is faith? **Hebrews 11:1** tells us: "*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*"

Faith has at its core surety and certainty. Faith is not some hazy emotion without any grounding in reality. Real faith is the assurance of an irrefutable truth! It is real!

Though faith is based on solid evidence, it doesn't mean faith comes naturally or easily.

In **Romans 8:24 & 25** Paul says: "*For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.*"

Paul is making an obvious point in this passage. You don't hope for what you already have. Faith involves a huge element of trust.

Our faith comes when we examine the evidence and see that God has indeed proven Himself to be unchanging and consistently faithful in our lives and in our world! And then we believe and trust that He will fulfill all of His promises to us. And it's upon that belief that we act.

And let me tell you, if you're not acting on your belief, you probably don't believe your belief.

That's what **James** says in the second chapter of his book, verse 14: "*What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?*"

And he underscores it in verse 17 when he says: "*faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*"

So to get this shield... this faith... to work the way it was intended to, we need to pick it up, hold it up and we've got to use it!

And one more thing about this type of shield, when Roman soldiers came under an attack and their enemies would begin firing arrows and other projectiles at them, the soldiers would close ranks into formation called the testudo, or tortoise, formation. Those soldiers on the outside of the formation would use their shields to create a wall. And those in the middle of the formation would raise their shields over their heads to protect everyone from any incoming projectiles. The result was a formidable human tank that was almost impossible to stop.

Imagine if we, God's Church, disciples of Christ, joined *our* shields?  
Imagine if we strengthened each other with our faith?

Imagine if we built up and served one another within the body of Christ?

Imagine if we reached out to the lost of our community?  
Church if we would live that way, we would be an unstoppable force!  
We would be the church the way God wants us to be the church!

That's just a thought.

With our belt of truth, our breastplate of righteousness, gospel of peace and shield of faith, the next piece of equipment Paul adds is the helmet of salvation! It's there in verse 17.

Protecting one's head in battle would seem to be a, wait for it, no brainer!

We don't even have to talk about the importance of a helmet to a soldier in battle. Yet, as Christians we often leave our minds unprotected! And that's just foolishness! Dangerous foolishness!

Paul says put on the helmet of salvation. Jesus is our salvation! And we're supposed to focus on Jesus and let His thoughts become our thoughts.

**Philippians 2:5** tells us: "*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*"

And when we do that we will find our minds are transformed and renewed. We'll find we're not as easily distracted by those things that make us angry or scared or worried or bitter! We won't be as easily tripped up by lust, jealousy or anger. Instead, we'll find ourselves focusing more and more on Jesus and those things that are true and honorable and pure and just and excellent and holy!

That is the mind God has called us to have! It will be near impossible to stand as we are called to stand, without that mind!

Then in the last part of verse 17... Paul says we're to take the sword of The Spirit. And we don't have to guess about what that sword is because it says what it is right in the text! The sword is the Word of God!

To the Roman soldier, his sword was generally short, not long like you'd see in the Three Musketeers, but probably 16-18 inches long. And it had sharp double edges. The perfect weapon for close combat!

The gladius as it was called, was one of the most feared weapons of the age! And if you saw one up close it was likely the last thing you saw!

Notice it's the only offensive weapon we're given. And that's because it's the only offensive weapon we need! It's the Word of God!

And **Hebrews 4:12** says:

*"...the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."*

The sword of The Spirit is all-powerful! It's able to cut through every attack our enemy can come up with! When wielded by a true servant of God, nothing can withstand its ability to cut straight to the core of a matter and uncover the truth.

The Word of God was the weapon Jesus used when He was tempted by Satan in the desert! Each time Satan tried to trip Him up, Jesus answered how? By quoting Scripture! "*It is written...!*" "*It is written...!*"

If Jesus used the Word of God like that don't you know we can too? No wonder Paul tells us to take the Sword of The Spirit!

One more thing to consider about this sword, it's short because when you're dealing with the Spirit, with the Word of God, it is best and most effective shared one on one, up close and personal!

The truth is the kingdom of God has been and always will be, built one heart at a time!

And finally, Paul tells us the last piece of essential equipment is prayer.

Look at verse 18, *...praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.*

What does that mean? It means exactly what it says it means. Pray!

Jesus said in **Luke 21:36**: “*Always watch and pray.*” In **Acts 6:4** the Apostles said: “*We will give ourselves continually to prayer.*” It was said about Cornelius in **Acts 10:2** that he “*prayed to God always.*” Multiple times in his letters Paul exhorts and encourages believers to pray and to pray without ceasing. And Paul modeled that for us, saying in **2 Timothy 1:3**, “*...night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers.*”

The idea here is a prayer life that is consistent and constant.

Paul is talking about a life pattern. He’s talking about an awareness and a consciousness of God’s presence at all times, one that leaves your heart open fully to hearing from and listening to God. That’s what it’s all about! That’s what it means!

And if you see prayer as something you have to do, if you see prayer as a chore then you’re never going to understand prayer! The simple truth is you’re never going understand prayer until you allow God to change your heart and mind! You’ll never understand prayer until you train your ear to hear from God and know He hears you!

And finally, after we’ve put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shod our feet with the gospel of peace, picked up the shield of faith, donned the helmet of salvation, taken up the sword of

the Spirit and tapped into the power of prayer. After all that, what do we do?

To find that answer we have to back up a couple of verses to verse 14, where Paul tells us what to do. And what Paul tells us to do, is to stand firm!

We're to stand!

*“What do you mean stand?” You mean, we put on all this armor, we prepare ourselves for battle and then all we’re supposed to do is stand? We don’t get to charge off into the fray and get us a piece of the enemy?”*

That's right! We're called to simply stand firm!

**2 Chronicles 20:15** reminds us: “*For the battle is not yours, but God’s*”

Isn't it interesting that standing is neither an offensive nor defensive position. Standing is instead, a statement position! By standing firm as God calls us to do the statement we're making is, “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*” (**Philippians 4:13**)

By standing firm the statement we're making is, “*God alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.*” (**Psalm 62:6**)

And when we make that kind of statement, the principalities and powers of this world, the powers of this dark world, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms, they shudder and they're driven back!

And what's more, when we make that kind of statement the lost people of this world will see us standing firm, and take note! Those who can't

stand because they don't know Jesus Christ as their savior, they'll see! They'll see the power of a loving God and they'll be drawn to Him!

When we stand firm the statement we're making is not only are we geared up for the game, but we're most definitely in the game! Made alive by God, equipped by God, and being used by God!

And for the follower of Jesus Christ there is no higher calling! There is no better place to be!