

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

January 3, 2021

Overcomer

“The Belt of Truth”

Ephesians 6:10-14a

Does anyone enjoy camping? During my high school and college days, I did lots of camping. I love collecting camping gear and braving the elements for a few days at a time. Camping is also a very cost-effective way to hang out with your friends and family. On this one camping trip, my friends Aaron, Chris, and I went to the state park at Clark Hill Lake outside of Augusta, GA. We set up camp and thought it would be fun to take a quick hike and throw the frisbee around before dinner. When we found a clearing in the woods, the frisbee went flying. Suddenly, we hear something that sounded like gunshots and it sounded like it was really close, so we got out of there in a hurry. We thought we were heading back to our campsite, but we kept walking and walking. After a while, I was convinced we would be sleeping in the woods that night without any of our camping gear - no flashlights, no food or water, no matches - we had nothing except a frisbee! It was getting pretty dark at this point, and finally we spotted the edge of the water. Unfortunately, we discovered we were on the opposite side of the lake from our campsite. It would take hours to hike around the lake, so we decided to swim for it. We took off our shoes and put our wallets and keys inside our shoes, and we found a stick to hang our shoes and keep from losing our keys and wallets. I offered to hold one end of the stick, but Aaron and Chris thought they were stronger swimmers and could keep everything dry. About halfway across the lake, I picked our stick out of the water and helped carry our shoes, wallets, and keys to shore. Hot dogs and beans around the campfire was the best meal ever that night. It is one of my favorite camping adventures, but it is a reminder of not being prepared. I wish I had geared up for our quick hike before dinner. A compass, a flashlight, and some water would have been so helpful on our adventure.

With the start of 2021, we are starting a new series around the powerful images that we see in Ephesians 6. Overcomer is about how we fully embrace our faith to overcome the challenges in our lives. God has given us all the necessary gear we need for the journey of life. Today we will focus on how truth is such an important part of our discipleship as followers of Jesus. Our Scripture for this new series is from Ephesians 6: 10-18.

Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and his powerful strength. Put on God's armor so that you can make a stand against the tricks of the devil. We are not fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens. Therefore, pick up the full armor of God so that you can stand your ground on the evil day and after you have done everything possible to still stand. So stand with the belt of truth around your waist, justice as your breastplate, and put shoes on your feet so that you are ready to spread the good news of peace. Above all, carry the shield of

faith so that you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word. Offer prayers and petitions in the Spirit all the time. Stay alert by hanging in there and praying for all believers. Ephesians 6: 10-18 (Common English Bible)

Life is not easy. There are so many human enemies that we can see all the time: disease, disaster, and people doing harm to each other. We could have endless conversations and interventions about those kinds of enemies. Fighting these human enemies that we can tangibly see, and experience require us to gear up with everything that God can provide.

Yet, Paul says we are fighting against forces of cosmic darkness and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens. I am no expert on spiritual warfare. I have never been the person that blames the devil for bad decisions on my part. The impact of living in a fallen world has created enough darkness on the inside of me. However, Satan is not a fantasy or a myth. There is an evil one whose goal is to defeat Christ's church and undermine every follower of Jesus. We must prepare ourselves for some tremendous struggles with everything that God has to offer us. We have to gear up with the full armor of God.

Jesus is the truth. Whenever we talk about truth, we have to start with Jesus. I do not know how to make any sense of the world without Jesus. Whenever I have made something else the mission of my life, I have always been disappointed. I love the way that Bob Goff has expressed this reality. ***"Whatever you're aiming for, Jesus is better."*** Bob Goff

Pursuing Jesus is better than pursuing anything else in your life. If more of Jesus is not the top of your New Year's Resolution list, your list will disappoint you. Ordering our lives around Jesus is the best thing we can ever do. Here is how Jesus goes about defining Himself as truth in John 14.

Do not be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. My Father's house has room to spare. If that were not the case, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too. You know the way to the place I'm going." Thomas asked, ***"Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?"*** Jesus answered, ***"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you have really known me, you will also know the Father. From now on you know him and have seen him."*** John 14: 1-7 (Common English Bible)

Jesus invites us not to be consumed by our troubles, but to trust in God. We often experience so much heartache when we do not trust in God. I am so grateful for our increased awareness about mental health and focusing on our inner life. There is a lot of conversation among Christians about the importance of mindfulness practices around how we might eat differently, care for our bodies more completely, and deal with anxiety and stress. Self-care is so important. Worship, prayer, reading Scripture, experiencing

Christian community, and serving others are ancient ways of self-care and great ways to grow our inner life. Yet, sometimes it seems like we discount these ancient spiritual practices for the sake of more modern ones. God wants us to experience peace in our minds and in our souls. The truth is that we must trust God and pursue Jesus to discover the best version of ourselves.

I love this image of the Father's house having room to spare. We often think if you do not believe in Jesus and follow Jesus in a similar way as I do, then you are missing the truth. Jesus says that He is the way, the truth, and the life and that no one comes to God except through Jesus. If Jesus is your foundation of truth, then you are heading in the right direction. I believe it is more important for people to know Jesus than for people to agree on every point of theology or every ministry practice. Jesus is preparing a place for us. Let us get as many people as possible to that place. We are a church that offers many different ministries for many different people. We celebrate different styles of worship - traditional and contemporary. You might prefer one style over another. That is OK! The most important thing about worship is experiencing God's presence in community together - the style of worship is not the most important thing. The truth is God's house is a big, big house with lots and lots of room.

Learning the Biblical balance of truth with love. One of the most central truths in Scripture is God's love. God created the earth and all of humanity out of love. For God so loved the world, that God sent His one and only son. The Holy Spirit empowers us and sustains our life every day because of love. Yet, we need to always remember truth with love.

God's goal is for us to become mature adults—to be fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are not supposed to be infants any longer who can be tossed and blown around by every wind that comes from teaching with deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to deliberately mislead others. Instead, by speaking the truth with love, let us grow in every way into Christ . . . Ephesians 4:13-15 (CEB)

God wants us to be mature people who reflect the fullness of Jesus. We should be rooted in truth so we are not easily persuaded by those who would mislead us. The pathway to growing in Christ is speaking the truth with love.

In reflecting on the belt of truth, what if we thought about it as the gear that helps hold everything about our faith. There have been a few times in my life that I have left the house without a belt around my waist. My first thought is that it will be fine, belts are helpful but not essential. After a little while, I start to struggle and realize that I am not going to be able to make through the day without my belt. The belt is an essential piece of gear, and we need to learn this Biblical balance of the truth with love.

If our belt of truth is too tight, we will lose our ability to fully live and love according to God's grace. I think about the Father who looks for the prodigal son to come home. I think about Jesus when a woman is caught in adultery, and Jesus calls

those who have not sinned to cast the first stone. Our God extends grace and forgiveness. We need to be people who speak the truth with love. The truth of Jesus will not make the impact that God desires if our words and our actions are devoid of love. We can talk about the truth all day long, but if there is no love, people will have a hard time believing the truth.

If our belt of truth is too loose, we will lose our ability to fully live and love according to God's goodness and righteousness. Many people have questions about their identity and are struggling with who they are called to be in the world. The truth is that God created us and has called us very good. We are God's handiwork. God created us the way that God intended us to be, and God created us in Christ to do good things. The ultimate place to find answers to our questions is seeking God. When we seek out answers to questions in every other place, it will be very difficult to find answers that will truly satisfy our souls. The truth is our God sets some significant boundaries for us not to punish us but to provide for us. God desires for us to experience goodness, righteousness, and freedom from sin.

We are our living in a world where truth has become so relative. I hear people saying all the time how they are living out, "my truth." The reality is that Jesus is the truth. God is our constant. As we celebrate Epiphany today, we remember the Magi being guided by the star to the place where Jesus was born. God sent Jesus to the world for everyone. Allow God's truth to be the guiding star in your life in every way possible. As we pursue truth for ourselves and speak the truth in love with others, I pray that we will find Jesus and share Jesus with others. As we come to the table today, I pray that we will experience Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life.

Icebreaker I – What were some of your (or your kids) favorite dress-up costumes? Why those?

Icebreaker II – Have you ever found yourself lost somewhere? How did you find your way back?

1. Where do you see the devil's schemes being played out in the world today?
2. What makes up the "armor of God"? Which parts are defensive weapons? Offensive?
3. In what ways does the armor enable us to stand against evil?
4. What is the "truth?"
5. What "ancient ways" of self-care do you practice?
6. What does "speaking the truth in love" mean to you?
7. Is your belt too tight? Is your belt too loose?
8. How can we pray for you this week?